

# DOCTOR WHO

HERITAGE



DALE SMITH

BBC

# DOCTOR WHO

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DALE SMITH



*'Things go missing on Heritage. It's one of the hazards of living here.  
One of the many hazards.'*

Nobody visits Heritage. Why would they? Dry, dusty and hot, it's nothing but a failed mining colony too stupid to realise that it's actually dead. No-one wants to visit, least of all Ace. But the Doctor's got his hearts set on a flying visit, just while they're in the neighbourhood. That's when he finds that Heritage wants visitors just as much as visitors want them.

So, while Ace is getting friendly with the locals, the Doctor is trying his best to convince them he's not interested in their secrets. All he wants is a few quiet days and a nice cup of tea.

Trouble is, secrets have a way of unearthing themselves when the Doctor's around. Whether he wants them to or not.

*This adventure features the Seventh Doctor and Ace*

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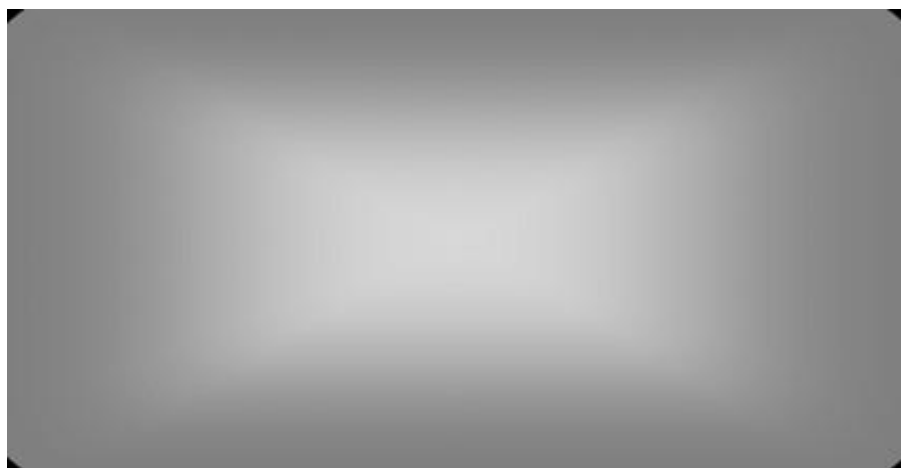
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# DOCTOR WHO



HERITAGE

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**DOCTOR WHO: HERITAGE**

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*For Cathy Howkins*

*Lurve you.*

Episode One

## Chapter One

6. August, 6048 CE

09:20

*'...transport you to the luxurious colony world of Heritage, where you will spend the days doing the vital work of Thydonium mining, and spend the nights enjoying all the amenities of a state of the art colony Habitat...'*

Federation brochure for Heritage.

The first person to notice it dismissed it almost instantly.

He happened to glance briefly up, and saw the pale glow, and then spat into the dust and went about his business. Why should he worry? He'd seen the moons before, and they hadn't yet fallen on him. He didn't even glance back up as this moon continued to grow and burn, choosing instead to wrap himself in his bed and fall asleep.

The second person to see it wasn't quite so nonchalant. By the time she cast her eyes up at the sky, the moon was a moon no longer. Now it was a second sun, burning bright in the sky, bringing daylight. And this sun was growing with a speed that was unbelievable. In the two seconds it took for her to shade her eyes with her hand, it had already doubled in size and intensity.

Then the growling started. An angry static, it cut the air and tore at ears.

Within moments, the second person to see the new sun was no longer alone. All around her, people appeared, bare feet stirring up the dust and dressing gowns carelessly flapping over bare knees. Soon, nearly the entire town was out in the streets, eyes to the heavens, squinting against the glare. Each had their own theory about what was happening. None were right; after all, how could they be expected to guess the truth?

As it grew larger, confusion grew into disbelief. People blinked, as if hoping it was merely a mass hallucination, as if that would be easier to understand. Mouths hung open, eyes gaped, hearts skipped a beat. From behind a plastic window, a small red-haired girl stared agog, trying to make sense of this strange new vision, this interloper into her quiet world.

It was only to be expected. The last time most of these people had

seen a shuttle craft, it had been arcing off into space, leaving them the bone-breaking task of building a new world.

The air still bled with the roar of the shuttle's engines, and retros scorched the sky as it sped overhead. Every pair of eyes followed the same arc through the sky, and finally came to rest on the shuffle's destination, the landing pad. To any other town, it would have been obvious. To Heritage, it was as if the wonders would never cease. As one, the townsfolk turned with their eyes still fixed glassily on the sky. Without a word, they headed to the landing pad, following those who could remember where it was.

By the time they got there, it was already too late.

A thick cloud of dust had been thrown into the air, choking the whole area. It swam in front of their eyes and pushed itself into their lungs. No one coughed, they were used to it by now.

No one spoke, because everybody was thinking the same thing.

The piercing roar of the shuttle's engines could no longer be heard; the pilot had obviously sobered up and put as much distance between himself and Heritage as he possibly could.

Many who stood in the choking dust envied him. None expected what happened next.

Reluctantly, the dust settled again, revealing the shuttle, sitting incongruously on the split and cracked tarmac. Deep within, the red dust could easily be seen, the thin blood in Heritage's veins.

From behind the slack-jawed crowd came a voice:

'Move! Get outta my way! Let me through, Goddamn it!'

Most parted, but no one took their eyes from the shuttle.

They had seen the bullnecked man with the bristled hair every day of their lives for the past twenty years. They knew his beady eyes and ruddy cheeks as well as they knew the badge pinned to his chest, the badge that read 'SHERIFF' – or would have done were it not for a dent obscuring the 'E'. So what if he was struggling to pull on an old leather duster over bulging paisley pyjamas? That was the kind of excitement needed on a mundane day, not today. Today would be something talked about for decades; the day the shuttle landed.



The latecomer stood there in silence, staring at the shuttle, his eyes barely visible beneath his frown. Nothing happened.

Sheriff coughed quietly, more to break the silence than anything else.

Still nothing.

‘Clear back,’ Sheriff growled, raising his hands to the crowd.

‘Give me some –’

Something hissed behind him.

Sheriff only managed to half turn before he was hit full in the face. The crowd screamed, and leapt back as one.

The airlock door had opened, air rushed to fill the vacuum, dragging with it thin red dust. It swallowed Sheriff instantly, leaving him coughing and cursing. The crowd reacted as if the dust was afire, jumping back out of its way and landing on the people too slow to get out of the way. They shrieked as if this was some new alien invader, rather than the same dust they had been washing out of their clothes and hair for the last twenty years.

With a thump, the airlock door hit the ground, creating a gangplank. Sheriff just about managed to rub the shock out of his face before the girl appeared, looking down at them all.

The townsfolk looked up, amazed.

The girl looked back down at them, their faces smeared powder red.

‘Gordon Bennett,’ she said.

At first, Sheriff had been convinced that the entire town was going to follow them all the way to Cole’s. They had kept their distance from the strangers, as if afraid that they might disappear if touched. But every step the two strangers took, the entire town had taken with them. Sheriff was convinced that if the three of them had paused mid-step, then the twenty people following behind them would stop too. An entire town of flamingos, wading in the dust.

Not that Sheriff could blame them; had he been anyone else, he would have been equally agog. First, there was the shuttle, then came the girl. She was young, and somewhere in the middle ground between plain and good-looking: she had good structure, though – perhaps

when she was older, and had grown out of displaying her badge collection on her coat. But she was something new, and on Heritage that meant she was a goddess; after two decades of staring at the same faces, anything different was beautiful.

She had stepped down from the shuttle – rucksack casually flung across one shoulder – with a look of calculated composure on her face. Sheriff could tell she was trying to give the impression that this sort of welcome was nothing new to her.

Perhaps it wasn't.

'Professor!' she had yelled across her shoulder, into the dark doorway. 'The welcoming committee's here.'

And then he had appeared.

He had stood there for a moment, looking at them with cool grey eyes. He was an imp of a man, barely up to Sheriff's chest, and dressed in an understated and yet wholly inappropriate manner. His hand was clutched on the red handle of an umbrella as he casually applied his weight to it, those eyes rolling across the crowd. Then, like a switch being flicked, a gap-toothed grin had split his face and he had bounded down the gangway to share it with his public. Sheriff wasn't fooled though; he had felt those slate grey eyes fall on him, a second before the grin. He had felt the coldness in them, a vacuum, and had shivered.

Trouble, he had thought.

'Somebody told you we were coming, didn't they,' the stranger had demurred, overcome. 'You shouldn't have.'

His young – what? Daughter? Friend? Lover? – had simply glared at him, a look of exasperation on her face. She'd looked at Sheriff then, just for a moment, and given him a look. He does this all the time, that look had said.

The little man was passing through the crowd, grinning and raising his straw hat at each spectator in turn.

By the time he had reached the girl, he caught sight of the look on her face. There was a flash of guilt then, before he had turned that toothy grin on her and scuttled by, his hat still in his hand. His other hand had been twirling his umbrella with a flagrant disregard for the safety of any of the onlookers' eyes.

‘Come on, Ace, no time for autographs,’ he’d said.

The girl had sighed, and kept on glaring. But she had shouldered her bag and followed in his footsteps, too. He had some hold on her, then.

‘I wouldn’t stand there if I were you,’ he had announced to the crowd. ‘Not unless you’d like to be frazzled.’

He had taken too much pleasure in that one word for Sheriff’s liking, rolling his Rs with more than a little relish.

Seconds later, everybody had dived for cover again as the shuttle’s engines belched fire, and it gracefully rose into the morning sky. Everybody except the two strangers, who were heading towards the town.

Definitely trouble, Sheriff had thought.

Sheriff hurried across the dirt, his duster falling open at the front and revealing his pyjamas to the morning. A few well-placed glares had dealt with the crowd – not many in Heritage dared argue with his sunken eyes and brow – and they were doing their best to disappear now. That was quite a feat in itself; there was only one route into Heritage, and the desert was as flat as roadkill all the way across the ‘Flats until your eyes ran into the mountains. Still, by the time Sheriff caught up with the two strangers, he couldn’t see another soul from the landing pad to Cole’s bar and grill.

Sheriff had used the time it had taken him to huff and puff over to the strangers well; he had the perfect opening gambit to regain the upper hand.

‘You oughtn’t have done that,’ he said coolly, although the effect was dampened somewhat by the sweat trickling into his eyes. ‘Done what?’ The little man’s eyes dropped to the dented badge. ‘Sheriff...?’

‘Just Sheriff,’ he replied automatically, although it had been a good few years since somebody had asked *that*.

The girl just glared at him. She obviously had some problem with the law; guilty past.

‘You oughtn’t have let your shuttle take off without you,’ he continued, fighting not to let them see how out of breath he was.

‘That’s the first shuttle we’ve had round here in a good long while.

You might have a wait on your hands, once you realise you ain't where you want to be.'

That one worked; the little man looked worried now, no cheek-to-cheek grin to be seen. The girl just glared at him. Not again, her eyes said.

'Oh,' the little man said, crestfallen. 'You mean this isn't Heritage?'

A cloud of dust rose into the air, as Sheriff's jaw fell into it.

'Come on, Professor,' the girl said, not taking her eyes from the lawman. 'I'm getting bored.'

The little man gave an apologetic smile and doffed his hat.

He scuttled up the road to join the girl, whispering something that Sheriff didn't catch under his breath. Perhaps 'road' was a little optimistic; it was really little more than a patch of dust that people who didn't want to get trampled by horses tended to avoid. Certainly there was no sidewalk to speak of; the dust rolled from Cole's bar on the one side, right the way to the foot of Sheriff's own station. There were a few more buildings down the road – Roberts' General Store, Doc Butler's office-cum-barber shop – but for the main, the road was Heritage. A handful of wooden shacks further down, a scattering of farms outside the town limits, but that was all. Nothing impressive.

Nothing Sheriff wouldn't leave behind in a second if the opportunity arose.

Nothing worth hiring a shuttle to come and visit, no matter how 'in the neighbourhood' you were.

Sheriff's eyes drifted unconsciously across the horizon, barely noticing the way the sky seemed to melt into the sand. His eyes looked elsewhere.

He shook himself – visibly – and then looked nervously about to see if anyone had seen him. All up and down the road, curtains twitched. Obviously, the novelty had worn off, the adrenaline of the surprise soured and cold. All up and down the road, people were starting to have the same thoughts: who were these strangers? What did they want? Why had they come here?

Why now? What did they know? Fastening his duster against the cold, Sheriff resolved to find out.

‘Hey,’ Sheriff called, striding after the retreating figures. They were talking to each other, their heads nodded into each other’s and whispering conspiratorially. ‘Wait up.’

The little man turned and doffed his hat again.

‘Ah, Sheriff, just the man.’ he said, that smile back again, hiding something. ‘I’m the Doctor, and this is my friend Ace.’

The woman nodded at him, barely acknowledging the introductions. Sheriff eyed her carefully, trying to suggest both innocence and deep mistrust at one and the same time. Knowing his luck today, it probably came out looking like constipation, but he had to do something to claw back the upper hand.

All the time, his brain was racing; ‘Doctor’ and ‘Ace’ – not real names...code names? What else could it be? What kind of man gave up his identity and hid behind a title for the rest of his life? One with something to hide *from*, obviously.

‘Doctor,’ Sheriff nodded, keeping his voice even. ‘Ace. What brings you to Heritage?’

‘The friendly locals,’ the girl suggested, not even bothering to mutter.

‘Ace,’ the Doctor warned under his breath. ‘We’re just here for a little visit, that’s all. Take in the sights. Visit some old friends. Actually, we were wondering, I don’t suppose you’d know where we’d find the Heyworths, by any chance?’

The thing about someone of Sheriff’s size was that he had more blood than a smaller person. It sat close to his skin, trying to cool itself, and reddened him, making him blush constantly.

Because there was so much more blood to push round, the heart had to work that much harder. It strained and stressed and tried to keep the blood circulating with panicked, scampering beats.

Because Sheriff was such a red-faced, fast-pulsed man, it made the effect so much more startling as the blood drained from his face, and his heart paused.

‘The Heyworths?’ he said lightly.

‘Yeah,’ the girl piped up, still glaring. ‘They’re old friends of the Professor’s.’

Sheriff felt something gnawing in his belly, his ulcer had just awoken.

‘Well you’ve had a wasted trip. They don’t live here any more.’

The little man’s face fell, all the joy seeping out of it. He looked for all the world as if he’d just dropped the world’s largest icecream into the red powder dust.

‘They don’t?’ he said, as if hoping he’d misheard.

Sheriff shook his head, and said:

‘They moved out. Couldn’t stand the dust no more.’

He prayed for just an instant that a storm would suddenly blow in and whip the dust into a frenzy. At least then he wouldn’t have to deal with the little man’s eyes boring into him, stripping away the layers one by one.

The stranger looked round then, taking his eyes from Sheriff for what seemed like eternity. It didn’t make it any easier for Sheriff to bear.

The Doctor was looking at the main road, at how its surface was a just a sea of the dry red dust. Maybe he was looking at the houses, crude plasticrete prefabs with the dust lubricating every joint. He was looking at the dry sheen on the plastic windows, the clothes people wore. He was looking at his own clothes, seeing how they’d already been invaded in just these few moments, how the dust had worked its way into the seams, desperate to cling to his skin. At least, that was what Sheriff hoped he was thinking.

An acid tang in his belly, his ulcer growled again,

‘They must have left on the last shuttle out,’ the Doctor said lightly.

In his head, Sheriff let rip with the loudest, most disgusting swearword he knew.

The Doctor fixed the red-faced man with one last look, before swinging his umbrella up onto his shoulder and turning to rejoin his friend.

‘Come on, Ace. Try and keep up.’

This time, Sheriff didn’t bother chasing after the two figures as they shuffled away down the road, one swinging an umbrella and the other kicking sullenly at the dust. There wasn’t much more he could do or

say, not if his last great brainwave was anything to go by. No, now it was time to bite the bullet and do what he should've done in the first place. Wakeling would have to be informed. And God alone knew what *his* response would be. Anything but good, Sheriff didn't wonder.

Pulling his duster tight around him, Sheriff spun around and headed back down the road, trying to ignore the fire in his belly and the pounding of his tired heart.

He failed on both counts.

And elsewhere, a little red-haired girl was staring out of the window, still in her pyjamas from the night before. She was looking out into the dust, watching the little man with the umbrella and the girl with the brown hair as they walked away from her. Something about the little man held her attention; she watched him all the way down the road, until she couldn't see him any more.

'What are you looking at, Sweetness?' said Daddy behind her.

But the little girl said nothing in return.

## Chapter Two

6. August, 6048 CE

09:42

Ace had seen bars before in her time, everything from East End pubs to alien wine bars. Often, she'd managed to get served in them. Until the Doctor turned up, of course, and then it was lemonades all round. But that didn't take away from the fact that she knew bars – she got the measure of Cole's bar and grill from the second she pushed through the swinging saloon bar doors and cast an expert eye around.

Everything appeared to be made of wood – although the Doctor had said they were a long way into her future, so it was probably future wood grown in test tubes from plasticine or something – and had a liberal covering of the dry red dust.

Perhaps it wasn't intentional, just a hazard of living on such a dry planet, but the words 'spit and sawdust' still came into her head regardless. She guessed that the red dust didn't show up the blood much, either.

The decor was strictly Wild West chic: the bar was plain wood,

covering the length of one wall; there were wooden stairs in one corner leading up to a wooden balcony that a well placed stuntman could get shot off at any second; the chairs and tables were simple and functional, and probably cheap so that should they get used as a weapon on a Saturday night, it wouldn't be any great loss. The only decoration in the whole place was the single huge mirror that covered the entire wall behind the bar: Ace could see herself looking back, severely unimpressed.

Yep, Ace knew bars, and it seemed like nothing much had changed since her day, at least not out on the frontiers. Cole's had the air of a rough pub, meant for rough men who liked rough drink and rough language, and wouldn't give a toss if anyone else didn't care for it. Cushions and finery were for benders and birds, and the only thing that mattered was that the beer was cold and kept on coming. It made her feel almost homesick.

The only thing that was missing was the punters.

Perhaps it was just the early hour – perhaps a team of cleaners had just been rushed out the back door leaving the place spotless in their wake – but somehow, Ace doubted it. It was the feeling you got when you were in a building that had been empty for too long when it expected to be full, a loneliness that itched at the back of your brain. It was early, yeah, but if the bar was open then there could only be two explanations; either it was expecting customers, or it needed them – desperately. Ace knew which she thought was most likely, and that set her curiosity twitching; after all, it's not like there was a lot of competition nearby – as far as Ace could tell, this was the only bar on the planet.

The swing doors behind her batta-batted again, and the Doctor walked in, painfully oblivious to the sombre mood.

'Ah,' he said, resting on his umbrella as he sniffed the air.

'This will do perfectly.'

There was movement then, and for the first time Ace noticed the bartender. Once she spotted him, she was surprised at how she had managed to miss him; he was a thick-set man of about thirty, with dark, bristly hair growing up out of a shaved scalp. His eyes had a slight slant to them that made Ace think there might be some Chinese in his history, but if there was then it was a long way back as his skin was ruddy and pink. He was wearing an apron smeared with what



looked like a thousand different things, only a few of which could be said with any certainty to be food-based.

He was also halfway through poking a screwdriver into his arm. Well wicked, Ace thought.

Perhaps she would have been more concerned had the arm looked remotely human, but since it didn't she could only find herself impressed with the .well, futuristicness of the whole thing. The arm was obviously robotic, barely anything more than two bits of metal hinged together with three prongs to act as fingers welded to the end. As the screwdriver bit and twisted, the fingers jerked sporadically, an imitation of a reflex. Every now and again, a rain of red dust hit the polished surface of the bar, falling out of the arm's innards.

He looked up, and was fazed by their appearance for about five seconds.

'Just gimme a minute,' he said, his voice thick with a Newcastle accent. 'Bloody thing's bugged again.'

Ace breathed a sigh of relief; it was the first time she'd met a cyborg that hadn't offered to assimilate her.

The Doctor grinned a broad grin and scuttled over to the bar.

'How do you do? I'm the Doctor and this is my friend, Ace,'

he eyed the bartender's arm with a hopeful grin. 'Can I be of assistance?'

The bartender gave the screwdriver a savage twist, and shook his head politely as more thin dust trickled out onto the bar.

'Nah,' he said amiably, 'thing just needs a good clean. Dust gets everywhere, you know. Buggers up the servos.'

'Ah,' the Doctor said, nodding sagely. 'You know, you can get some very reliable ones these days; self-contained, self-cleaning, airtight seals..'

The Doctor trailed off; the bartender was already shaking his head.

'Nah, wouldn't feel right, my gran fought in the last Cyberwar,' he tapped the arm against the bar, and smiled as the fingers curled up to his satisfaction. 'Only got this so I could do me fly up wi'out a fight.'

So, what can I get you?’

The Doctor nodded understandingly, giving the impression that he was giving the plight of the bartender’s grandmother and the question of what to order equal weight. Ace didn’t bother saying anything, she knew what she would get.

‘A glass of water, and a lemonade for my friend, I think,’ he said finally.

‘Got to charge you for the water,’ the bartender said, turning to his fridges behind him. ‘And we don’t do lemonade.’

Sounds about right, thought Ace.

‘Well, just a water, then,’ the Doctor said, not disheartened in the slightest.

The bartender shrugged and opened up the fridge. Inside, there was row after row of milky coloured bottles. He pulled one out with his good hand, and cracked the seal with his other, before pouring the contents into a tall tumbler. The water barely came halfway up the side of the glass. Ace gave it a disdainful look, which the bartender caught.

‘Sorry,’ he shrugged, seemingly genuine. ‘Water’s hard to come by round heres. Don’t s’pose you’d know that, being tourists.’

The Doctor smiled benevolently, and took a sip of his drink.

‘Are we that obvious, Mr...?’ the Doctor fished for names again.

‘Cole. Sorry, I forgot you wouldn’t know. Been a while since we had visitors,’ he said, offering the Doctor his hand.

‘I suppose that’s my answer as well,’ the Doctor smiled, returning the shake with vigour.

‘Everyone round here came over in the same shuttle, Doctor,’ Cole said, lifting the Doctor’s empty glass in one smooth movement. ‘Everyone on the planet, even. We recognise a new face.’

‘What brought you all here?’

‘Not the pleasant bloody climate, that’s for sure,’ the big man chuckled, and wiped the red dust from his bar with a cloth.

'Heritage was gonna be a big Thydonium mine, twenty years back. Figured maybes we could put up with a bit of dust and dry for that, didn't we.'

'Thydonium,' the Doctor echoed, obviously trying to remember something.

'You'll've seen it on the news 'bout ten year ago now. Some bright spark at Galactic Centre managed to synthesise it, didn't he. Much cheaper than mining the stuff.'

'Ah yes!' the Doctor grinned, obviously pleased at having his memory jogged. Ace tutted.

'Professor!'

The Doctor's face fell; sometimes he just needed a nudge here and there to remember the little social niceties.

'Oh. I'm sorry,' the Doctor said, but the bartender waved it aside with a metal hand.

'So why d'you stay?' Ace asked, trying to lower her rucksack gently to the floor without letting the Doctor see how delicate she was being with it.

Cole looked round, a broad grin suddenly splitting his face.

'And give up all this?'

Ace grinned back: his smile was infectious that way. But she still wasn't going to let the Doctor off the hook that easily. He got another glare.

'We'd been here a whiles by then. Settled in,' Cole shrugged again. 'Couldn't bear the thought of doing it all again, somewheres else.'

'So what d'you do here?' Ace asked, eyeing the bottles behind the bar with a professional air. Something in there might make a pretty hefty bang, given the right encouragement.

'Instead of mining, I mean.'

'We get by,' Cole said noncommittally. 'You never know when owt will turn up.'

Ace nodded politely. She had already run her own translation in her

head; we don't do anything. We're the dull capital of the universe.

Her eyes flicked back to the Doctor. He was staring into the mirror, lost in his own reflection with that faraway look in his eyes, the one he'd taken to wearing recently. Not a hint of any deep and dangerous plot bubbling away under the surface. No ancient evils on his mind, needing a final trap setting before they were ready for the chop. Worst luck. No, just that quiet thoughtful look and the desire for some comfy slippers and a fire to rest in front of.

He'd been like this for months now, either shuffling round the TARDIS like a night watchman making sure no one had broken in during the last few minutes, or sitting in an armchair in the control room pretending to read a book. There hadn't even been an armchair in the control room before the last few months, let alone time to sit in it. Every time they landed anywhere, she expected this to be the one, the time when everything would be back to normal and something would attack them. It didn't really matter what any more – sometimes, she prayed for a grumpy squirrel to just snap – just something to shake the cobwebs from him.

It never was.

Every time the TARDIS landed these days, he'd usher them out and use local transport to get them as far away as possible from it. A few days meeting old friends, or visiting dusty monuments, and then back to the TARDIS and away. And all the time him grinning and gurning like...well, like he used to when she'd first met him, she supposed. But not like her Doctor.

Something was definitely the matter, and if he didn't let slip what it was soon...well, if they'd been anywhere interesting in the last few months, it would have been a tough decision whether to go back to the TARDIS or not.

With a start, Ace realised that the Doctor was looking right at her, through the mirror. The crafty old sod.

'Can I get y'anything else?' Cole asked, eagerly.

Ace looked at the glass of water pointedly. Cole chuckled to himself.

'Aye, overeager,' he conceded. 'I s'pose I ain't used to customers, this time of the day and all. It's usually the dead time

– most people're in their gardens, you see. It'll pick up later.'

Somehow, Ace couldn't bring herself to believe him.

The Doctor tapped his umbrella to his lips, something of the old fire glinting in his eyes. Could this be it, maybe? The thing he'd been brooding over for months? Was he just preparing himself, and now at last there'd be some excitement?

'There is one thing,' the Doctor said, evenly.

Despite herself, Ace realised she was holding her breath.

'I think my friend could do with some breakfast,' he said, the fire in his eyes chilling over again. 'Can you perhaps rustle up something for her?'

'Aye,' Cole said, grinning almost as furiously as the Doctor.

'Thank you,' said the Doctor, and proceeded to settle himself into one of the chairs by a table. He didn't look like he was planning on moving any time soon.

Figures, thought Ace.

Sweetness was being daring. She was breaking the rules. She was having an adventure.

It felt good.

She was meant to be in her room, getting herself ready for Daddy – brushing her teeth, combing her hair, putting on her daytime clothes and not her sleepy night-time clothes – but she wasn't. Daddy had told her to go and get ready as soon as the red-faced policeman had turned up at the door, and she had dutifully climbed up the stairs to her room without a word. But then she had decided to be daring and break the rules, and she'd turned right around where she was.

So now she was stood, not at the top of the stairs, not at the bottom, but not right where she could be seen. She could barely hear Daddy and the sweaty policeman talking, just the occasional raised voice. But if she leant out ever so cautiously, she could just make out the two of them in the living room downstairs.

Daddy had one of his plastic toys in his hand, and was waving it around. Every time it swished through the air, the red-faced policeman flinched, as if afraid it might just catch him. Sweetness smiled, she liked to see the policeman looking silly.

Something had happened, and that something hadn't made Daddy happy, and that something was the policeman's fault.

Sweetness smiled again, she liked to see Daddy angry, too.

'Bernard!' came Daddy's voice, echoing up the stairs to Sweetness's waiting ears.

This was thrown over Daddy's shoulder, out into the dirt behind the house. Sweetness decided that perhaps it was time she became a good girl again and went upstairs. It didn't have anything to do with the fact that Bernard was coming inside. Just because she didn't like Bernard, didn't like the smoky smell he carried around with him, or his tiny little eyes. Didn't mean it was because he scared her. No, sometimes it was just fun to be a good little girl, and good little girls did what they were told.

Sweetness hurried back up the stairs, and made sure that her door was firmly shut before Bernard entered the house. Not that she was afraid. No, just in case, that was all.

Ace sat with her elbows on the bar, and her feet tap-tapping against the barstool. In front of her was a vast white plate piled high with bread, beans, eggs and something orange that she didn't really want to identify. Martian rat's bladder, probably. It didn't make much difference; she wasn't hungry – for once –

and instead pushed the breakfast around her plate with a fork that thought it was a spoon. She was half hoping that if she swirled the dark beans around enough, they might rearrange themselves into the words 'Ace! Behind you!' and that'd be the end of the tedium.

A quick glance across at the Doctor; he was still sat in his chair, sipping another glass of water and staring off into the distance.

The next train out of Dullsville is cancelled. We apologise for any inconvenience.

She considered whining, but knew it would do no good; she'd tried everything over the past months, from humouring him to throwing a hissy fit. Nothing had worked. All she could do now was pray for something to snap him out of it, whatever it was.

Perhaps he was going through the Time Lord equivalent of a mid-life crisis?

‘Not what y’wanted, eh?’ Cole said, nearly making Ace jump.

She thought he was talking about the planet, until he nodded towards the breakfast.

‘Oh no, it’s nice,’ Ace said just that little too quickly. ‘The bread tastes...fresh.’

‘The Parry’s make it from reclaimed proteins. That’s what most people do, these days, make food, or grow food,’ Cole’s eyes twinkled at Ace, briefly. ‘You don’t want to know what the beans really are.’

‘I’m not really hungry,’ Ace said, pushing the plate away.

Cole smiled again and took it from her.

‘Aye, well,’ he said, then leant in so that Ace could hear him whisper, ‘Is your friend alright?’

‘Oh, don’t worry about him,’ she said glumly. ‘He’s just the Professor.’

‘Oh,’ said Cole, as if that explained everything. He gave her another smile as he sidled away with her plate, disappearing through a hidden doorway in the mirror. Briefly, Ace wondered if it lead to Wonderland or not. No, no escape that way; she was Ace, not Alice.

She spun around on the barstool and planted her palms squarely on her knees.

‘Professor?’ she said in her best casual voice.

The Doctor looked up absent-mindedly, floating back to Heritage from a million miles away.

‘Ace?’

‘I thought we came here to see your friends,’ she said – after all, even a dull plan was better than no plan at all. ‘That was the idea, wasn’t it?’

The Doctor’s face looked dark, and his forehead creased.

‘I don’t know, Ace. I’m having second thoughts.

Something...’

Ace summoned up all the false enthusiasm she could and pushed

herself from the stool. Her feet hit the wooden floorboards and sent a thin cloud of dust choking into the air.

‘Come on, Professor. You’re not going to let Deputy Dawg put you off, are you?’ In a couple of steps she was at the Doctor’s table, pushing her beaming face directly into his line of sight. ‘He’s probably just one of those "You ain’t from round here" kind of guys. I bet your friends are out there, just. .just doing whatever it is your friends do. Can we go and see them?’

Anything rather than sit around here all day.’

The Doctor looked into her eyes for a second, his own lifeless and grey reflections. With a rough finger, he reached across the table and tapped Ace’s nose. She grinned then, but it died before it was born; there was no joy in the Doctor’s gesture, just a hollow reflection of it. His hand dropped back to the rough tabletop, and in an instant it was as if he’d never moved.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘It’s probably a long journey. Why don’t we just wait for the shuttle and try another time?’

Ace tried to remain calm. To a certain extent, she succeeded; she didn’t reach across the table and shake the Doctor by the lapels until he snapped out of it. At least that was something.

‘It can’t be that far,’ she countered. ‘There’s only the one town on the whole planet.’

‘Two,’ the Doctor said softly.

‘Whatever. I bet someone’ll lend us a jeep for the afternoon.’

Ace looked over her shoulder and saw Cole once more back at the bar. ‘Someone’ll hire us a jeep, right?’

‘A jeep?’ Cole asked. Right, chalk one up to progress.

‘A car? A motor vehicle? Transport?’

Realisation dawned.

‘Aw, no, nothing like that. Don’t last long enough, do they?’

Dust gets in them and wears them out. No, we don’t use them.’

‘So how d’you get about then?’



Cole looked perplexed for a few moments, considering. Ace had a sickly feeling that he was going to say that they didn't.

After all, where would they go? But then Cole ran a delicate hand over his head, and the sound of the bristles snapping back into place seemed to inspire him.

'I reckon Lee might have a couple of horses you could borrow. He won't be needing them today.'

'Lee, right, there you go Professor, we can borrow Lee's horses. Where's he live?'

'Bottom of the street, and take a right.'

'Right.'

Cole grinned that infectious smile again, and gave his bar a quick wipe. He was obviously pleased to have been able to help.

'Where d'your friends live then, Doctor?' he asked, not taking his eyes off the job in hand. The cloth slipped left and right, leaving a shiny trail in its wake. Within seconds, the red dust was dulling it again.

The Doctor glanced up.

'The Adobe Flats,' he said in an even voice.

If there'd been a piano player in the bar, he would've chosen that moment to pause mid-tune.

Ace had to admit she was quite impressed with the way Cole reacted; if she hadn't been looking at him, she might not have noticed. As it was, it was barely more than a brief stutter in the pendulum motion of the cloth, a flicker to his eyelids and maybe a slight hiss of escaping breath. All in all, if you weren't looking closely – if you hadn't seen similar reactions a thousand times before – you might not have noticed.

Ace was looking closely, and she'd seen it all before. She looked at the Doctor, expecting to see the old curiosity burning in his eyes.

He was looking down at his hands, resting on the tabletop.

'You can't go there,' Cole said. Full marks out of ten for not repeating what had just been said as his mind raced to come up with a suitable lie. Very impressive.

‘Why not?’ Ace asked, coolly, pretending not to look.

‘Too many ghosts,’ Cole replied, without thinking.

Ace tried one last glance at the Doctor; he still refused to take an interest. Well, sod him, maybe this was a new kind of initiative test. Yeah, that would be it; let her take complete control by pretending to become a . .

Ace knew that wasn’t the answer, but it didn’t matter. There was something being hidden, and she had to find out what. It was what they...she did.

‘What d’you mean?’ she asked, trying to remain calm but still sound like she would believe him. This was starting to look like an interesting trip after all.

Cole smiled, trying to blind her with it. It didn’t work. He looked back down at the bar.

‘The mines’re out there,’ he said softly. He looked up again, and caught her eye. There was something there that was hard to ignore. ‘It’s dangerous. They’re falling apart. Best leave them alone.’

Ace considered. It sounded plausible – old mines were dangerous, after all – but there was no way she was going to let this go now. Not now she’d found something that might actually be a hint of excitement. To be quite honest, she didn’t care if it did just turn out to be crumbling mineshafts; there was something out there that someone didn’t want her to see, and that was enough for her. It was either that, or stay here and fossilise like the Doctor.

‘Professor?’ she said, pulling her rucksack over her shoulder as she stood.

‘No, Ace,’ he said softly, his grey eyes imploring her, ‘Mr Cole’s right. Best leave it alone.’

For the first time in her life, Ace actually felt disgusted by the Doctor. It was a feeling that she didn’t quite know how to handle, so she did what she did best; she ran away.

‘I’ll go get us those horses,’ she said over her shoulder, but she didn’t look back as she sped through the swing-doors.

The Doctor watched her go, something twitching just below his skin:

fear.

‘Kids, eh?’ Cole tried to say lightly. He was still obviously shaken by two little words. ‘Are y’gonna stop her?’

‘I don’t know,’ said the Doctor. ‘I don’t know if I should.’

And with that, he turned back to his tabletop and sat and stared.

### Chapter Three

6. August, 6048 CE

10:23

*‘O I was fascinated by the old myths and legends when I was a boy; Earth, Mars, Jo – they all seemed to have so much more history than Europa. But yes, I suppose it was Sisyphus who rather caught my attention, a-ha!’*

Anthony Attwood,

founder of Mark Anthony Robotics,

in conversation.

Cole stood behind his bar, polishing the glasses carefully with a damp cloth. It was something that he had had a lot of practice at, when he’d first arrived on Heritage. Hold the glass in his good hand, the cloth in the other; sometimes, the pressure sensors in the fingers would give out, and the glass would be crushed before he had even noticed. It also stopped the metal fingers from chipping and scratching the glass.

Back in the good old days, he’d soon learnt that if he left a row of glasses out of the washer for more than five minutes, they’d develop a dry red skin that would have to be rubbed away before any drinks could be poured. Not that it had been such a problem in the old days. Some nights, the glasses barely seemed to touch the shelves before somebody or other was yelling for the same again, Colesy. Now he barely even got them out of the washer; most nights the bar was empty. Most nights since Sheriff had broken the news to them. For a while they’d kept on with it, drowning their sorrows, trying to divine the future in the dregs of a vodka shot, but that had soon stopped. It had become too uncomfortable, glancing round, catching the eye of your neighbour.

Secretly, he was pleased that the two strangers had turned up; he’d

only opened up to see if one of the Greenwoods would turn up to start the day as they meant to go on. If they hadn't arrived, Cole might have spent the day in his bedroom with his guitar and a bottle of his homebrew vodka. Or else gone for a walk, like he had so many other times. No destination in mind, just walking and singing to himself. Always ending up at exactly the same spot.

The Adobe Flats.

Cole continued wiping the sparkling glass in his hand, watching the little man in the funny hat.

The Doctor was still sat in the same chair he had dropped into on his arrival, his fingers splayed out before him and his dark little eyes fixed on them. He gave the impression that he was watching each mote of dust as it fell through the air, predicting where it would fall, how it would eddy and dance. He wasn't, though, Cole knew; his eyes were actually on the far side of the room, watching the little creatures that were playing there.

Cole could guess that – for somebody who hadn't lived with them for the last twenty years – the Fussies were an odd sight.

They were like aerodynamic bricks rolling around on invisible wheels, racing blindly around in a desperate bid to complete their task. They had no eyes – not in the way Cole thought of eyes, anyway – and no ears either. Just a thin snout that always shuffled along the floor, and lungs that constantly breathed in.

They sucked up anything that was left in front of them: some nights Cole even found the daft little buggers trying to inhale the dirty glasses. Their skin was a metallic brown, intended to blend in with the plasticrete floors. It never worked, of course, because they were always rushing in and out of your eye-line, drawing attention to themselves.

They were shy little things, but Cole could tell that – even without eyes – they were watching the Doctor as intently as he was. 'Daft little beggars, ain't they,' Cole said conversationally.

The Doctor looked away from them for just a second, and flashed a brilliant smile that totally failed to reach his eyes.

'Oh yes,' he said, enthusiastically, before turning his attention back to the Fussies.

Cole kept smiling, wondering what his next gambit should be.

‘Best thing MA Robotics ever did for us,’ he added, conversationally. ‘Not that they’re faultless, mind. But they keep the place clean. Well, clean- *er*, anyways.’

The Doctor didn’t take his eyes from them again, just nodded quietly to himself, watching the little robots dance and whirl. Perhaps he didn’t realise they were just too stupid to wait for the dust to settle, thought Cole. It was always the way; they’d bustle off somewhere else for hours, and then race back into the bar all over-enthusiastic and blow all the dust airborne before they could even suck half of it away. Not that robots got enthusiastic. Badly programmed, whatever.

‘What do you call them?’ the Doctor asked softly.

‘MAR Zero Twenty-fives,’ Cole shrugged. ‘All the advertising bumf calls them Fussies. It kind of sticks.’

The Doctor nodded to himself, and a brief smile flicked over his lips. It was the first time Cole had seen a genuine smile from the stranger.

‘Somebody had a classical education,’ the Doctor said, and took his hat from his head. He rested it on the table, but his fingers didn’t let go. Instead, they tapped and toyed on the straw, almost in time to the Fussies’ dancing. ‘They seem happy.’

‘They’re vacuum cleaners,’ Cole snorted. ‘Course they’re happy. Look at this place; all the dust you could eat and still more for tomorrow. Never go hungry on Heritage, do the Fussies.’

‘Hmm.’ said the Doctor, his fingers growing still. ‘It must be very...calming having such a simple life, simple goals, simple responsibilities. Do I suck up that dust there, or that dirt there?’

Or do I leave it all and have a cup of tea instead? I wonder if they see it like that.’

Cole stood and tried not to breathe. There was something about the Doctor. The girl, she was all energy and excitement, that bristling teenage energy that made you want to run out and solve the world’s problems there and then. She was. .well, she was fascinating and terrifying all in one black satin coat. But him, he didn’t have that. He carried about the air of one who knew that some problems just couldn’t be solved, no matter how you turned and worried at them. He radiated guilt, either for something he had done, or something he

hadn't, or something it was inevitable that one day he would do. It made him fit right in on Heritage.

'It must be wonderful,' the Doctor continued musing, 'not to make your own decisions. To have a series of codes running through your body, tugging you this way or that. Or do they have decisions to make too? I wonder what they're like inside.'

Cole made a swipe at one of the little robots which was happily making its way across the bar. They were meant to be programmed not to do that. With a swift movement, he flicked it over on its back, and watched it struggle like an insect trying to right itself.

'I could open one up for you,' he offered, toying with the base of the robot, his fingernails scratching across the serial number.

The Doctor shook his head softly, more to suggest that Cole didn't understand than to decline his offer. Cole might have said something then, asked for some explanation, maybe even asked the Doctor what was wrong, if he could help. He didn't, though.

Instead, he turned like a startled rabbit and stared. The Fussy on the bar gave an agile little twist of its spine, landed back on its belly and scuttled away, making good use of the distraction. Cole didn't even notice; he was staring at the swing doors.

They were swinging.

Batta-batta.

'Tea, Colesy,' a cultured voice said, *just* slightly too loud, and with the intonation in *just* the wrong places. 'I'm parched.'

Cole nodded hurriedly, and immediately rushed to the other end of the bar.

To someone who hadn't met a Cetacean before, Bernard might have appeared a little strange. Not to Cole. Even though the dolphin was only five foot across, and barely five foot tall when he was in his walker, Cole still treated him like a bomb with the timer ticking.

It was the walker that made Bernard not a mammal to mess with. The steel frame curved all around him, hugging and caressing his glistening, grey skin, moisture constantly pumped into the spaces between machine and dolphin. His front flippers were encased in a flexible, satin-like material that was actually a very clever mimetic

polymer that detected the tiniest of twitches in the flippers and translated them into backwards and forwards, up and down. All pretty standard for any Cetacean who wanted to get around whilst landborne. No, the thing that made Bernard's walker different, dangerous, were the two little nubs nuzzling underneath his belly; pistols.

Bernard eyed the bartender, and let out a snort of air. There wasn't a cigarette in his blowhole at the moment, but the way the flesh was dry and discoloured suggested that there had been recently and might be soon.

The kettle boiled instantly, as hydrogen and oxygen atoms were set into rapid vibration by the filament. Cole took his eyes from the dolphin for a second to pour the water over the tea-ball, and when he looked back, Bernard's attention was elsewhere. Thank God. The walker took a hissing step, and brought the Cetacean round to face the Doctor. The little man didn't move, merely remained trying to coax one of the braver Fussies into his hand with a trickle of red sand. Somehow, the robots seemed to be eyeing Bernard, and wisely kept their distance.

As Cole waited for the tea to brew, two more figures entered the bar; a muscular-looking man who appeared to have shaved all the hair from his body save for a handlebar moustache and a few dark locks flowing down the back of his neck; a short, black-eyed woman with a delicate red scar over her right cheek.

Neither looked much past twenty. Both took up residence behind Bernard, leaning on the bar and not saying a word. Cole didn't bother asking if they wanted a drink; if either Ed or Christa wanted a drink, they would just take one.

'Well,' said Bernard's imperfectly synthesised voice. 'You must be one of the strangers.'

Cole closed his eyes and prayed that the Doctor wouldn't laugh; it was a strange experience, meeting those beady black eyes and twin snub-nosed pistols for the first time. Watching the gangly metal legs chicken-strut their way over to you, and then hearing that plummy actor's voice strike up just when you were expecting clicks and claks. Many others had laughed when they'd first met Bernard. Many others had regretted it.

The Doctor didn't laugh. Instead, he turned in his seat, a surprised

look on his face.

The grin appeared as the hat rose.

‘How do you do? I’m the Doctor,’ he said jovially, all trace of his prior melancholy gone, or at least well hidden. ‘And you are?’ Ed sneered.

‘He’s Bernard,’ the young man scowled, leaning back onto the bar. ‘You’re in his seat.’

‘Really?’ said the Doctor, standing up and aside. ‘I do apologise. They must have made some real advances in these walkers since I last saw one. The last dolphin I met couldn’t bend her legs in the right direction to get into a chair. Oh, I’m sorry – do you prefer dolphin or Cetacean? You’re a long way from the ocean, aren’t you; it must be quite a trek when you fancy a dip.’

Cole placed the tea on the bar as quietly as he could and took a discreet step backwards. Even Ed and Christa edged a little away from their master, wincing against the coming explosion.

For a second, all that could be heard was the hiss of Bernard’s moisture pumps as they struggled to cool the dolphin’s boiling blood.

‘Why is it,’ the dolphin’s synthesised voice calmly mused, even though Bernard’s sharp little teeth were grinding against each other, ‘that some people will always assume all you want out of life is a bucket of fish and a little swim round? Do I look like I want a swim? Do you think I would have moved here if all I wanted was sun, sea and sand?’

‘Well, you got sand,’ Christa muttered to Ed. The shaven-headed youth grinned, showing long white teeth.

Luckily for both of them, Bernard chose not to hear. He was already pacing around the Doctor, metal feet lifting and falling like a bull pacing the dirt in defiance of a matador. His beady little eyes were locked on the little man in the dark brown jacket, barely audible clicks rattling in his throat; obscenities that his translator was too demure to scald the air with. As he paced round, the sun glistened on the walker’s pistols; two blank, black eyes staring straight at the Doctor.

Cole had seen this before. Within seconds, the Fussies would have a very bloody stain to clear away.

He didn’t want to look, couldn’t look away.



Christa and Ed leaned closer, eager for the show to begin.

The Doctor replaced his hat.

‘And what exactly do you want, Mr Bernard?’ he asked, his voice a delicate undertone.

Suddenly, the little man’s eyes were dark – more than a match for the dolphin’s. Cole found himself wondering where the idiot grin had disappeared to so suddenly. Even the dolphin was taken aback – just a few seconds ago, he’d been talking to an idiot tourist who was about to get himself into more trouble than he’d ever dreamed. Now. .well, now he was talking to an enigma; the little man might well have been carved out of stone, the amount his face gave away. Cole glanced around; he could tell he wasn’t the only one suddenly wondering just where the stranger had come from.

‘I just want what’s best for you,’ Bernard said, the speaker on his belly not giving away a trace of his disquiet in its measured tones. ‘Heritage can be a very dangerous place, for strangers.

You don’t know the area. Maybe it would be best if you just went back to wherever you came from, before you hurt yourself.’

The Doctor looked at Bernard carefully, his eyes brushing past the steel cage, the glistening skin, looking within. He didn’t spare a glance for the dolphin’s associates, still leaning on the bar smirking to themselves, waiting for blood. Somehow he didn’t need to, the weight of his gaze passed through Bernard as if he were glass, and settled like ice into the heart. Cole could feel it from where he was standing, right from the other end of the bar: heavens knew what it felt like to Bernard. It was amazing he was still standing; that look could corrode metal legs in an instant.

Unnoticed by anyone, the Fussies began to circle, concentrating on the Doctor.

‘Ever since I arrived here, people have been telling me how much better it would be for me if I left,’ the Doctor intoned, a statue on the dusty floorboards. ‘Ten minutes ago, I might have agreed with you.’

A pause; the words settled to the ground, leaving the red dust undisturbed.

The Doctor grinned from ear to ear. It appeared out of nowhere, materialising onto his face.

‘How could I possibly leave, when you’re all so concerned for my welfare?’ the Doctor spun on his heels, making directly for the staircase in the corner. ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll go and inspect my room.’

And with that, he disappeared from the bar, leaving Bernard glaring and Ed and Christa still grinning. A few seconds later, Cole realised that he hadn’t even mentioned hiring a room out, let alone given the Doctor a key.

Ace had found Lee’s house with surprising ease – well, surprising ease for someone who’d grown up in the suburbs of London.

Before the Doctor, her world had seemed cripplingly limited – a few shops, a park and a pub, and everything decent at least forty minutes away on the trains. She wondered what it would be like for her if she’d grown up on Heritage; the same stifling closeness of a small town, only with the only possible escape light years rather than minutes away. Just waiting the twenty-four hours before the shuttle would return would be hard enough.

It was such thoughts that had set her stomach turning as she’d walked up to the small wooden cabin and gingerly knocked on the door. She was expecting the same reaction they’d received everywhere else; fear and distrust and warnings to get out of Dodge. The sort of welcome the Doctor usually thrived on, rather than taking to heart. But the reaction she actually evoked when the door swung open was far more surprising.

Lee was standing in the doorway, looking down at her. He was a tall man, with shoulders so broad they could probably sleep two small children. He was also old enough to be her father – grandfather even, if her mother had been an early blossom – with his slicked-back, black hair flecked at the temples with white. His eyes were still clear, though – a piercing hazel that contained more than a little sparkle.

He was also standing in the doorway, frozen to the spot with shock, one hand still on the handle as if waiting to slam it shut again.

If I was twenty years older, Ace had thought, and he could move...

Still Lee hadn’t said a word, instead standing back to allow her to see the inside of his little cabin. No, to allow her to walk into his little cabin.

With a smile of thanks, Ace had waltzed in, leaving Lee still hovering

in the doorway.

After a few minutes, Lee had apparently found his voice. He'd sat her in a decidedly uncomfortable wooden chair long enough to introduce himself and ask her if she'd perhaps like a cup of tea. Okay, so not a Shakespearean soliloquy, but it was a start.

She'd asked for her tea strong and milky, with just a couple of sugars. When it had returned, it had been pale and black, without a hint of sweetness. Either her descendants had all become health-freaks in the intervening centuries, or else no one had thought to pack a cow when the miners had been sent to Heritage.

'Well,' said Lee, his voice rich and mellifluous.

He didn't say anything else.

He lowered himself into a chair opposite, and sat looking at Ace, his fingers intertwined in front of his face. He was still smiling that beguiling smile. Ace couldn't help smiling back, but didn't want to spend the next twenty minutes grinning and falling into chestnut eyes. She took a sip of tea instead, taking advantage of the moment to flick her eyes about the room. It was a fair size, decked out in the same plastic wood as the bar.

There wasn't much to it, a large range-like stove in the corner (which probably ran by nuclear fission); stairs leading up opposite, twisting so Ace had no clues about what lay above.

There was a fair amount of furniture lying about, all made from glistening wood. It looked like the kind of stuff from the IKEA catalogue that Ace's mum would dream about – all gleaming finish and curving lines. All very pretty, but the one she was sitting in was starting to put an ache in her spine.

'I don't suppose you've come to place an order?' Lee finally managed, still smiling. He chuckled at Ace's bemused expression. 'I suppose not, then. The furniture. I sell furniture, all my own work.'

Ace sipped her tea, and tried to forget what she'd just thought about the chair.

'I didn't see a sign,' she said awkwardly, trying to make conversation.

'Why would I need a sign?' Lee asked, genuinely puzzled.

Ace considered, and sipped her tea again.

‘I must admit, business isn’t exactly booming,’ Lee mused, settling back into his chair uncomfortably. ‘Nobody seems to like my designs. They think they’re too "retro".’

Ace looked at the furniture around them, the cool modern lines and fashionable earthy tones, and wondered what people considered modern these days. She felt like her gran.

‘You used to be a miner?’ she said, looking around the walls.

They were mostly blank, but here and there were photographs; Lee looking a lot younger, an old woman with tightly curled hair, Lee and another man.

‘Everybody here used to be a miner,’ Lee said, his eyes elsewhere. ‘Or else they used to do something for the miners.’

This town didn’t grow up over the centuries, you know. It appeared overnight, with one aim in mind. We *were* a mining town.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Ace said, awkwardly.

Lee shook himself gently, the smile reappearing. Now Ace looked, she could see that the smile didn’t quite warm his eyes, leaving the deep hazel looking like frozen chocolate. There was something deep down in Lee that was frosted over, thin ice.

It reminded her of the Doctor.

‘No, I’m sorry,’ he said, running a hand over his dark hair, wiping away the sheen of dust and the sombre mood. ‘That’s not the way to welcome a guest. Our first guest – on Heritage, I mean. What brings you here, my dear?’

Settling back into her chair, Ace put on her ‘let’s do business’

face.

‘We’re looking for some transport,’ she said, pinning Lee with her eyes. ‘The guy from the bar said you might be able to help.’

Lee raised an eyebrow.

Cole stood behind his bar, carefully wiping the glasses, and trying to look invisible. The bar had that kind of atmosphere now – even as the

sun rose in the sky outside, the bar seemed to grow darker. The red dust in the street began to soak up the heat, drinking in the sunlight, reflecting, spreading it until the day looked like dusk, the sky red and opulent. The more sun the dust drank in, the more it stole from the bar, making it dark, brooding, dangerous.

Cole tried not to hear, not to see, not to speak, as the four gathered.

They tried to speak to each other calmly, but their voices betrayed them.

‘He’s nobody,’ Ed – the first – said, eyes rolling to the ceiling in pretence of boredom. ‘Let’s just kill him.’

‘No,’ the second – Bernard – interrupted, his teeth clicking together in a way that, if he was human, would be the same as a shaken head. Bernard’s was the only voice to remain unchanged; calm, crisp, betraying none of its owner’s emotions. ‘You didn’t look into his eyes. He is somebody. He is dangerous.’

‘So?’ said the third. Christa was sitting on one of the stools, the toe of her dusty boot running up and down Ed’s leg. ‘So he’s somebody. Let’s kill him anyway.’

Bernard clicked deep in his throat, but the computer in his walker saw fit not to translate. The metal feet were pacing nervously in time with the twitching of his tail; they stirred the dust and sent it creeping into the air. The dust was starting to gather again, the Fussies remaining on the outskirts of the room, watching.

‘Possibly,’ Bernard mused.

‘Nah,’ said Cole, trying to sound calm. In his metal grip, the glass he was wiping chipped and cracked; he’d forgotten to use his good hand. ‘You ask me, soon as his shuttle comes in, he’ll be away. He’s not here to start owt.’

Christa smiled lovingly over at him, thick lashes batting softly.

‘Open your mouth again, and I’ll pull your tongue out,’ she breathed.

Cole did his best to not listen, not look, not speak.

The fourth looked from one to the other, a deep scowl creasing his face, shrinking his eyes to pin-pricks. He hooked his thumbs into the belt-hooks on the dusty jeans he was wearing, the dim light catching

the tin star on his lapel, making it shine.

‘I don’t give a damn what you want,’ Sheriff growled.

‘Wakeling says he lives, for now. Anyone anything to add?

Good.’

Sheriff held out a hand, thick fingers spread wide an inch from the surface of the bar. Cole understood immediately, and reached to the shelf behind him. In one practised moment, he danced and turned and bowed, and a shot glass of vodka appeared in Sheriff’s waiting grasp. It was rough stuff – distilled by Cole himself in an outhouse behind the bar – but it did all that was asked of it.

Another practised movement, a pivot of elbow and neck, and Sheriff slammed an empty glass onto the bar.

‘Now nobody do anything until I get back,’ he said.

Then he strode over to the stairs, following in the Doctor’s wake, leaving the others to listen to the echo of his glass hitting the bar fading into nothing.

Ace felt a little better now. She’d managed to shake the kinks out of her spine and breathe in a little fresh air. The air here had a tang to it quite unlike any she’d ever tasted before. It was probably just the dust, and she wasn’t even sure if she liked it, but the sheer difference of it from the air back home made it heavenly. The Doctor spoke about the feeling – *had* spoken about it, before the grey mood had settled on him – the knowledge that every planet, no matter how grim and foreboding, had something new, something unique to it, that made it worth all the effort to find. When she was a girl, Ace would have sulked on a planet like this – nothing but thin, red dust – and moaned her boredom to anyone willing to listen.

Now, just breathing gave her a tingle of excitement. How far we’ve come, she thought.

‘I’m sorry to have to ask you to hire the horses. Ordinarily, I’d be happy just to loan them to you, but with things as they are...’

Ace flashed Lee a forgiving grin.

‘Nah, it’s okay, you’re only asking a favour anyway. So how come you’ve got *two* horses anyway?’ she asked, turning briefly as she

walked, to see Lee keeping pace behind her.

‘The other one belonged to Ryan,’ Lee answered, somewhere behind her.

The guy in the photographs, Ace assumed, taking note of the past tense. Probably best to change the subject.

‘But why horses? Wouldn’t a...’ she ground to a halt; the Doctor hadn’t exactly been forthcoming about the year – she had no idea what the current technology was like. She settled for:

‘Something with a motor, anyway.’

Lee snorted.

‘Electronics wouldn’t last a week out here, my dear Ace. Not with this dust to contend with. No, nature has the best solutions.

Mankind has been using horsepower for transport for thousands of years, and I’m sure we will continue to do so for many thousands...’

Ace stopped, her feet kicking up the dust around her. Lee had trailed off, and as she turned he was stood behind her, still and silent. She couldn’t understand it; he was staring straight ahead at nothing, just a fence erected in the dust.

‘I don’t...’ he managed.

‘Lee?’

‘They’re gone,’ he said quietly, almost to himself. ‘Not them too.’ Ace turned and looked where Lee was staring; the fences resolved themselves – the focus pulling back – until Ace realised.

They weren’t fences. They were a paddock. An empty paddock.

The horses were gone.

## Chapter Four

6. August, 6048 CE

11:42

Sheriff stood outside the only closed door on the landing for what seemed like an age. There was no sound from within; perhaps the

stranger had taken the opportunity to catch up on his sleep. Twice now Sheriff had raised a red hand to push the door open. Twice he'd let it fall back to his side – his hands were still shaking too much. He prayed that he hadn't let his fear show in the bar downstairs. Bernard may look like a dolphin, but deep down inside he was a shark – the moment he smelt weakness, he would strike. Sheriff wasn't even sure what he was more afraid of now; the stranger, or Bernard and his gang of punks. No, that wasn't true. He knew. He was afraid of Wakeling.

Sheriff took a breath, and pushed the door open.

Perhaps it was the quiet, but as soon as he stepped into the room, Sheriff's eyes went straight to the bed. It was empty, and badly made up. He got an impression of the whole room in just a few seconds – the same roughly thrown together shack that you'd find anywhere on Heritage, just a single window bleeding red light on out-of-date furniture; Lee's work – no doubt Cole had been feeling sorry for the old bastard when he decorated this room. He drank it all in from the corners of his eyes, whilst his focus was taken immediately by the heap in the middle of the floor.

The Doctor was sat cross-legged on the pale boards, barely moving as the Fussies swarmed all over him.

There must have been at least ten of them – one third of the colony's total – each one fighting the others for prime space on the newcomer. They wriggled over his thighs, along his chest, down his back and along his outstretched arms. Sheriff had never found himself repulsed by the Fussies before – he'd never really paid them much attention, just another fact of life on Heritage, like the dust – but now he was. The way their metal hides flexed seamlessly, wriggling the creatures into motion, sent a shiver of electricity down Sheriff's spine that only grounded itself when it hit the ulcer growing in his belly.

'They seem to like me,' the little man said, looking up to Sheriff with clear grey eyes.

In one fluid motion – as if spurred on by the words themselves – the Fussies flowed away from the Doctor's body, and melted into the shadows at the corners of the room. Sheriff stood trying to remain impassive as the metal creatures became a single skin, peeling away, taking the stranger's straw hat with them. It landed on the floor with a soft pat-pat. By the time the sound had died away, there wasn't a single Fussy in the room.



Sheriff briefly wondered where they had disappeared to, how many other rooms had invisible bolt-holes to hide them in. Then the Doctor spoke.

‘Well, Sheriff,’ he said, his voice even, his eyes dark. ‘Have you come to tell me how dangerous it is around here for strangers? How it would be so much better if I just disappeared?’

How easily I *could* disappear?’

Sheriff said nothing, mentally scratching one approach from his list.

‘You don’t need to tell me,’ the little man said, letting his arms fall, his palms resting on his knees. ‘I know just how dangerous it is here. How dangerous it is everywhere, how easily the people you care about can come to harm.’

The Doctor looked up, fixing Sheriff to the spot with mournful grey eyes.

‘All I wanted to do was visit my friends, get some peace and safety so that I could think. Whatever is happening here, I *can’t* get involved.’

Sheriff struggled to keep his face stone, fought to keep from crumbling under the cold pressure of those eyes, the electric burn in his belly. He could feel the confusion coming from the little man in waves – two conflicting desires mauling and grappling for dominance – and felt it mirrored in himself. Was the man psychic? Could he tell what Sheriff was thinking? He wouldn’t need ESP – surely it must be written all over his face; the desire to confess cowed by the fear of what might happen if he did.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Sheriff heard his own voice say, the decision taken somewhere outside of himself.

‘There’s nothing going on; your friends just left town. They got sick of the dust and shipped out to Sale. At least there’s the sea there to break up the sand. They’re probably working in the desalination plant right now. You should try there for them.’

‘And if I do?’ the Doctor asked. ‘If I go to Sale and don’t find them? If I go to the Adobe Flats and see with my own eyes what has become of them, what then? What will the consequences of *that* be?’

‘You’ve lost me, Doc.’ Sheriff tried a chuckle to break the tension and hide his confusion. It failed.

‘I’ll know,’ the Doctor said. ‘And nothing I can do will change it.’

The way he said it, his eyes clouding over and dropping to watch the dust dance on the floorboards, made Sheriff think that it was the knowledge that scared the Doctor the most. Not the actual truth of the matter, but having to carry that knowledge with him for the rest of his life. Sheriff could sympathise with that; there were some things that just stayed with you, until one morning you just woke up and there it was staring you in the face – you knew, and you would never, ever forget.

‘Just who in the hell are you?’ Sheriff breathed.

The Doctor pulled himself to his feet, unfolding in one fluid movement. Without Sheriff even noticing the move, he picked up his hat from where it had fallen. One second his hands were empty, the next his hat was in one and that weird looking umbrella was in the other. The Doctor looked grim and jammed his hat back onto his head, covering up the wiry dark hair that still attempted to escape from the sides. He looked at Sheriff, and Sheriff looked back.

‘Just a traveller, I assure you,’ he said, and Sheriff didn’t believe a word of it.

‘Whoever sent you, whatever you’re here for,’ he said, pulling himself to his full height. He wasn’t a big man – not in height, anyway – but he still towered over the ‘traveller’. ‘You won’t find anything.’

‘Because there’s nothing to find?’ asked the Doctor. ‘Or because it’s been cleared away?’

Sheriff didn’t answer immediately, and he knew that spoke volumes.

‘I told you. Ben Heyworth and his wife shipped out to Sale.

End of story.’

The Doctor didn’t say anything immediately either. It made Sheriff wonder what he was thinking, what his next move would be. There was no doubt in his mind: the little man was an investigator – maybe an Adjudicator, although his choice in

‘undercover’ clothing suggested not. Somebody had said something. Somebody had talked, off planet, and now they were all going to pay the consequences for that night. Somewhere deep inside, Sheriff breathed a heavy sigh of relief, even as his ulcer flared.

The Doctor reached into his pocket and pulled out a gold fob watch. He flicked it open and glanced at the face. Concern creased his brow.

‘I should go and see what’s taking my friend so long,’ he said, dropping the watch back into his pocket.

He looked like he might say something else then, but he didn’t. Instead he paced over to the door, holding his umbrella tight around its middle.

Sheriff gave him a count of twenty, and then followed out the door after him. This called for a drink, or maybe several.

Ace watched Lee’s face, the skin almost orange in the morning sun. It didn’t betray a hint of emotion, as if the skin was a mask worn over the man’s true face. Even the eyes – those deep, rich, expressive eyes – showed nothing. They just twinkled, reflecting back the sun, as they slowly panned from left to right.

‘They’re gone,’ he repeated, redundantly.

Ace looked out to the paddock. The fences were all intact, the dust inside churned up by the hooves and tossed by the wind. At either end were troughs, one filled with water and the other filled with a sickly-looking slop that was obviously the horses’ feed in the absence of any grass. Two saddles were hanging up on one of the posts, the straps and buckles pat-patting against the wood in the breeze. The only things missing were the two horses that Lee had promised would be waiting for them.

‘Yeah,’ Ace agreed.

Lee just kept looking at the empty ground, as if expecting the horses to suddenly dig their way out and reappear, snorting in the way that horses do to suggest they are laughing at you.

Ace crouched down and ran a hand through the red dust; it was actually a very fine sand, tinged red like Martian sands. It shifted about loosely under her touch, her fingers sliding beneath the surface with ease. She felt a brief wave of disgust as she thought what she might find under there.

‘Not them too,’ he’d said. Ace wondered who else had gone missing, and remembered the photographs. The second horse *used* to be Ryan’s.

‘Come on,’ Ace said, striding towards the paddock.

'I'm sorry, Ace, but they're gone. You'll have to find some other transport.'

'I know they're gone,' she said, fixing Lee with her best stare.

'But if we have a look about, we might be able to work out *where* they've gone.'

Lee shook his head softly.

'You won't find anything,' he said softly.

'You won't know if you don't look,' she said defiantly, turning back to the paddock. The breeze picked up the sand, shifting and eddying it even as she watched. No use looking for tracks then.

'Yes I will,' Lee intoned, still motionless in the sand. It was starting to creep up his boots now. 'Things go missing on Heritage. It's one of the hazards of living here. One of the many hazards. We'd do better getting back to the house.'

But Ace wasn't to be deterred; she was already examining the gate to the paddock, subjecting it to a scrutinising squint. Firmly closed, latch still on. So they didn't kick their way out. The wind had obliterated any tracks that might have remained either in or out of the paddock. If there had been any in the first place. She crouched again, running the red sand through her fingers. Fine sand, easy to dig through. Then again, the fences were pretty low; they might have just jumped them.

'What stops the horses going over the fence?' Ace asked, not turning. She could sense that Lee was still behind her, reluctant to leave her on her own. Afraid for her safety?

He didn't answer for a while, but she refused to look. Any eye contact might break the spell, destroy the fragile hold she seemed to have over him.

'Lee?'

He sighed:

'Try it yourself.'

Ace shrugged; why not. Leaving her rucksack lying in the dust, she stood and placed her hands on the top strut of the fence. The wind seemed to pick up, tugging playfully at her skirt, pushing through her

thick black tights. She shivered slightly, and wondered if she was about to flash her knickers to a complete stranger. Not that he'd see anything. Not that it mattered. Not that she was worried. But here she was, still stood with her hands on the fence.

The wind blew again, and Ace shivered, even though she was sweating.

'I can't,' she admitted finally, feeling childish.

Lee came up behind her, removed her hands from the strut.

'It's a subliminal security system,' Lee explained softly,

'designed to induce a sense of unease the closer you get to the fence. It works on the horses, too. The only way to shut it off is to open the gate.'

Ace snatched her hands out of Lee's grasp, angry at being made to look stupid, again. Embarrassed at feeling so small, so young. She wanted to lash out at Lee, just to make the feeling go away. To make him realise she wasn't a little girl any more.

That's what the old Ace would've done. Instead she snatched up her rucksack and flung it over her shoulder with slightly more effort than was necessary. Not as satisfying, perhaps, but a whole lot more sociable.

'So they didn't escape,' she said, trying to bring her breathing back down to speed.

'No,' Lee agreed.

'So somebody – or some *thing* – took them,' Ace continued, and turned.

Now she fixed Lee with a glare, trying to force all of her previous anger into it, to bend it, transmute it, until finally it came out as hard ice. Her eyes were cold – she could feel it – her glare unbreakable. She looked like somebody that you wouldn't mess with, that you couldn't lie to. It was a trick she'd picked up from watching the Doctor at work.

Lee was transfixed.

'They're not the first to go missing, are they,' she said. It wasn't a

question.

Lee tried to avoid her, but the ice in her eyes froze him, locked him to her. His fingers started to dance in and out of each other, his hands interlocked.

‘Things have always gone missing on Heritage,’ he said, trying to hold back, trying to keep his secrets. Ace hardened her glare. ‘Little things at first. Tools, machine parts, ornaments.’

‘At first,’ Ace repeated. ‘And then?’

‘Then bigger things,’ Lee admitted. ‘Such as horses.’

There was something in his eyes, still. Something Ace couldn’t quite identify, but she knew it was something he was keeping from her. If she were the Doctor, she’d be able to read it there without him having to give it to her. If she were the Doctor, she’d already know exactly what was going on, and be halfway towards putting it right by now. But she wasn’t the Doctor, and she wasn’t even sure that the Doctor was right now.

All she could do was make guesses.

‘Things like horses,’ she repeated, ‘and Ryan.’

Inspired guesses.

Something flared in his eyes, a brief inferno of...fear? Hate?

Whatever it was, the heat of it was enough to melt the ice in Ace’s glare. The hold she had on him evaporated, and Lee pulled his eyes away from hers. He turned, perhaps thinking of heading back to his home, or maybe running even further. Wherever, he changed his mind; Ace still had some hold on him, even if it was only chivalry. Instead, he stood with his back to her, looking back into the town, watching as the sun began to reach its zenith high above them.

‘I’m right, aren’t I,’ Ace said softly. Again, it wasn’t a question.

‘Yes,’ breathed Lee, but didn’t look at her.

The sun was shining on Heritage now, there could be no doubt.

Up above, there was barely a cloud in the sky, just wisps slowly chasing the sun. The sky itself was a rich and deep azure – just looking up at it made you feel like you were standing over the deepest, bluest

sea and if you could just dive, you would be enveloped in its cool embrace. Looking over to the horizon gave you a joyous notion of the unfamiliar; the way the electric-blue sky fell into the crimson earth, it at once enticed you with its beauty and reminded you that this wasn't home, that this was *alien*.

At least, that was how the colonists had felt, when they'd first arrived on Heritage.

The Doctor walked down the nameless street that was the backbone of the town. His umbrella was over his shoulder, open to shield him from the glare of the sun, and his hat was pulled low. The umbrella and the sun conspired to cast his eyes into shadow, leaving most of his face indistinct, unseen. If he looked at the sky, the horizon, and felt its beauty move his hearts, then he did so without allowing it to show itself in his walk. His two-tone spats kicked through the dust, rapidly becoming three-tone; black, white and red.

Perhaps it made him feel he was walking through streets of blood. Perhaps not.

Every now and then, the little man would stop and pull his pocket watch out to face the sun. A quick glance at its digital display, and it would be banished to darkness again. He would look left, then right, then left again as if expecting a giant in green lycra to suddenly appear. Nothing happened, and the Doctor would tut to himself and move on again, moving at a pace that suggested both urgency and melancholy. That was the Doctor, ever the man of contradictions.

Perhaps he even realised he was being watched. Perhaps not.

Just one of many townsfolk watching the Doctor's progress up the street, Wakeling stood in the shadow of his doorway, his face expressionless. The sun reflected from the lenses of his glasses, making them flash white from the shadows. It must have been quite painful, standing there, motionless, as the sun did its best to blind him, but he showed no sign of it. He was a tall man, a thin man, with unruly brown hair that, had it not been so carefully trimmed, would have been regarded as a mop. He was dressed in a reserved fashion – dark trousers, white shirt, wine waistcoat –with his sleeves rolled up, as if ready for some great undertaking.

He was an automaton without power, a statue waiting for life to be breathed into it.

The Doctor stepped closer, and it happened.

A grin spread onto Wakeling's face, his eyes still glinting white fire, and he rushed out of the shadows. As soon as the sun touched his body – blistering his pale skin – it was as if the statue had crumbled, revealing a lithe tumbling of limbs and smiles. He was all animation now, rushing forwards before the Doctor had time to lift his eyes from the dust. Before he even knew it, the Doctor's hand was being pumped up and down in an enthusiastic vice-grip.

'You must be the Doctor,' Wakeling said, his excitement bubbling up in his voice. 'It's amazing to meet you. Absolutely amazing.'

The Doctor stopped walking, and let his cool, grey eyes drink the newcomer in.

'And you must be a friend of Bernard's,' the Doctor said, grimly.

Wakeling did a fair impression of looking bemused.

'Well, I know Bernard, but that's not saying much.

Everybody knows everybody on Heritage,' Wakeling laughed lightly, then fixed the Doctor with a quizzical look. 'What made you say that?'

The Doctor didn't return the smile.

'In my experience,' he answered, 'when one person tells you you'd better leave town, the next person who tries to be your friend usually put them up to it.'

Wakeling didn't even flinch, the smile shifting effortlessly into a look of deep concern.

'Oh dear. Has Bernard been threatening you? Please accept my apologies – it's the small-town mentality. That, and the climate isn't really suited for his people. You understand.'

The Doctor said nothing, just looked at his pocket watch pointedly.

'I'm sorry, you've probably got a thousand things you should be doing,' Wakeling said, politely. 'Look, I only came out to see if I could interest you in dinner; to make up for the reception you've had. What do you think?'

'I don't have time, I'm afraid. I've mislaid my friend, and if I leave her on her own too long she'll only get herself into trouble.

Serious trouble.'



‘Oh, I understand. I have a daughter too; my Sweetness.

Look, how about tea and crumpets then? It’ll only take five minutes.’

And then, just for a second, the Doctor saw it. The mask flickered for a second – the charming smile freezing in place for only an instant, but just a moment. In that second, the Doctor saw the cold face beneath.

‘After all,’ Wakeling said airily, the grin back again, ‘surely there’d be a thousand questions you’d want to ask me, if I was the man who set Bernard on to you.’

And perhaps the Doctor would still have refused, would have continued his search for Ace, if he hadn’t realised in that moment; Wakeling had let him see. He was luring him in, a snare, all part of some new game. A dangerous game.

‘Well, just for a moment, then,’ the Doctor said, flashing a mirror of Wakeling’s grin back at him.

After all, the Doctor had never been able to resist a game.

If a crow had been there at that moment, it might have watched the two men as they disappeared into the house. It might have seen them – short and tall – both careful to keep one eye on the other, barely seeing the house itself. Why should they? It was exactly the same as all the others. If there had been a crow there, it might have considered them an odd couple, and clacked its beak in wonder.

Then it might have spread its dark wings and taken flight.

From the air, a crow would see the whole of Heritage spread out below him. Well, the whole of Heritage Town – the planet was too big for one crow to see. But it would be able to see the two lines of identical wooden shacks facing off against each other, blank eyes staring across the no man’s land of the street. It would have seen Sheriff’s office at the one end, and Cole’s bar at the other. It might even have seen some arcane pattern in the way the sand swirled and swam, creeping in and out of every building.

One thing it was sure to see was the people of Heritage, spread far and wide across the expanse of desert, dark dots against red sands. None of them stood together – each individual was well out of shouting distance, as they worked their own allotted patch and nothing more – despite the fact that they were all carrying out the same work, one way or another. Some dug and cut wells into the soft sand, hoping to

bring forth new life from the desert. Others tended to intricate irrigation systems, each fed from the same metal standpipe, whilst wiping dust from the thick leaves of whatever fruit-bearing plant or hardy vegetable they'd managed to coax into stunted growth. Either that, or they attacked the dry earth with spades, turning mulch and waste into the dust, feeding the imported worms in the hope that they in turn would feed the soil.

Out to the west, one man strained with a solitary pick, digging shallow foundations for plasticrete sleepers that he laid down with care. If he had a team of men, it still would have been slow work, taking perhaps years to complete. On his own, the likelihood of his labours ever producing a working railroad was slim. Still he worked, as did the others, each carrying out the arduous work of pulling a living out of Heritage's dusty earth.

Had it been there, a crow might have turned its attention elsewhere, looking for carrion.

It might have flown out behind the houses, further back out towards the Flats and the mines. It might have flown over a square in the ground, and been intrigued enough to soar down towards it. Its claws would stretch and its wings fold back, until claw bit into plasticrete and it found itself perched on the post of a paddock. If it were there, it might have done this. If it had, it would have been rewarded with a sight of another strange couple.

This time, they sat in the sand – old and young, male and female – saying nothing. Perhaps a crow would know enough about humans to assume that she was his daughter, maybe even try to deduce some resemblance in her long brown hair and his severe grey-flecked slick-back. Or perhaps a crow would be able to look into her mind with its jet eyes, and read the thoughts that tumbled in there.

Something's going on. Something strange. Something dangerous. Something exciting. Different pieces all needing to be slotted together. Missing horses, missing people. Ryan. The Heyworths. And all of it covered in a fine film of thin, red dust.

Something's going on, and no one here wants us to know what it is. Well sod them. She was going to find out. It was what she did, now. It was why she'd been put here. Maybe even why she'd been brought here.

Was that it? Was it just another initiative test? The Doctor taking

himself out of the picture, allowing her to step up and solve the mystery, defeat the bad guy. Was she only this step away from finding out what place she had in the Doctor's designs?

No. The way the Doctor had been recently, that was no act.

But perhaps this was just what he needed to snap him out of it. Besides, how exactly should she go about revealing Heritage's secrets? What would the Doctor do? Why not go and ask him?

Doctor knows best.

And if there was a crow there, it might have seen the young girl pull herself to her feet, might have seen her brush the fine red sand from her jacket, her skirt, her tights and swing her rucksack onto her shoulder. It might have seen the determined look in her eye as she paced over to the man, watched her shadow creep over him until he was swallowed by it. It might have seen him look up, and seen the fear that hid in his eyes.

'C'mon,' a crow would have heard her say. 'We'd better go see the Professor.'

And then a crow might have grown bored again, and spread its wings wide, and flown straight up into the sun.

If there'd been a crow there.

## Chapter Five

6. August, 6048 CE

12:03

The first thing to strike the Doctor as he walked into Wakeling's house had a wingspan of about a foot, and eyes that glistened black.

It launched at him in a flurry of clak and caw the second he stepped through the door, thick black feathers pounding against his dark jacket. The Doctor instinctively tried batting the creature away with his umbrella, but the thin fabric was no match for beak and claw. It soon tore, entangling the bird in its delicate folds. The Doctor was forced to drop the umbrella, and it clattered to the ground, taking his attacker with it. By the time it had managed to free itself, Wakeling had entered the room and stood protectively in front of the Doctor.

The raven looked up sulkily at its master for a second, then hopped up to rest on his thin shoulder.

‘I’m sorry about that. Arabella can get a little feisty around strangers,’ he explained.

The Doctor dusted himself down, eyeing the raven cautiously. He picked up his damaged umbrella and looked at it forlornly, eventually wrapping it so tightly shut that the tear couldn’t be seen. He would still know it was there, though, and it would never keep the rain out again. Or the sun. Never come to rely on anything, the Doctor told himself. In the end, you’ll always regret it.

Out loud, he said:

‘I didn’t think ravens were native to Heritage.’

‘They’re not,’ Wakeling agreed, grinning in such a fashion as to let the Doctor know there was something he didn’t know. ‘In fact, we’ve not managed to find anything that’s native to Heritage, save for a few bugs and plants. Evolution’s pretty much left Heritage alone, these last few million years.’

‘Perhaps it got tired of the dust,’ the Doctor said, under his breath.

‘No, Arabella’s not a native. She’s a hobby.’

The Doctor looked at Wakeling over the handle of his deceased umbrella, and raised an eyebrow.

Wakeling smiled that smile again, charming and warm.

‘I made her myself,’ Wakeling explained. ‘Grew her from a sample I brought with me from the Gene Zoo on Earth.’

The Doctor looked at the raven with a modicum more respect; before it had been a murderous assailant, intent on having his eyes – now it was a scientific marvel. He glanced at Wakeling once – the younger man bobbed his head slightly, the pretence of permission asked and granted – and then turned his attention back to the bird. The feathers looked brimming with health and shine. The eyes shone, the beak glistened. It was remarkable, and the Doctor said as much.

Wakeling nodded again, but this time his grin gave him away.

‘How old is she?’ the Doctor asked, intrigued.

‘How old would you say?’ Wakeling replied, cagey.

The Doctor squinted again, but was careful not to get too close to the beak.

‘An hour or two at the most,’ he announced finally. ‘Given the progress of the cellular decay.’

Wakeling smirked again.

‘Three years,’ he answered smugly.

The Doctor nodded, as if this too was exactly the answer he’d expected. He turned away, walking deeper into the house and moving objects around with the tip of his umbrella. Toys and scientific equipment fought for space on the threadbare rugs, little else gaining space in the small shack. All in all, it wasn’t a particularly enticing living quarters.

‘I’m impressed,’ the Doctor announced, tipping the point of his umbrella at the bird. ‘Just getting a clone to last a few days would be remarkable, these days. I’m surprised you haven’t announced your breakthrough.’

Wakeling nodded, acknowledging the compliment, and began to walk Arabella over to its perch. It stood in the corner of the room, made from the same pale, glistening wood as everything else on Heritage. From such a vantage point, the bird must be able to command the attention of anyone in the room.

Which begged the question; did the bird prefer to sit, watching, or did Wakeling enjoy having his triumph on constant show?

The Doctor suspected he knew which.

‘Well,’ Wakeling demurred, ‘I haven’t perfected the process yet, you understand.’

‘Oh, yes, I can see that,’ the Doctor agreed airily. ‘There’s an obvious flaw in the right eye, to begin with. But still a good effort!’

Wakeling said nothing, perhaps biting his tongue, as the black bird hopped from his arm to its perch. It waddled into the far corner, turning its back on them, and pushing its beak under its wing to preen. All in all, it did a far better job of showing its distrust of the Doctor than Wakeling did. Or did a far worse job of hiding its feelings.

‘Please,’ Wakeling said, turning back to the Doctor, ‘have a seat.’

The Doctor nodded, but didn’t sit.

Instead, he looked around the small room; it was after all his first experience of Heritage’s homes. He suspected that they were all of a similar design – most colonies operated on a prefab construction plan, at least with the first buildings. After that, the more the colony grew and flourished, the more varied the buildings became. That the buildings on Heritage’s main street all looked identical on the outside, spoke volumes about the health of the colony as a whole.

The thing that interested the Doctor most about Wakeling’s home was not what was in it, though; it was what wasn’t. It bore none of the signs that a young child was growing up within it; the walls were pristine, no dirty hand marks or modern art. Yes, there were toys scattered here and there, but they were in pristine condition, and scattered well clear of the main routes through the room. At some point during their lifetime, even the most cherished toys lost an eye, or a hand. Sometimes, it made them all the more cherished. These toys were perfect; colours bright and limbs intact. The Doctor picked up a toy soldier. It felt cold, sterile.

‘Sweetness’s toys,’ Wakeling apologised, parental pride in his eyes. ‘She’s always leaving them underfoot.’

Whatever else he was, Wakeling was a good actor.

‘So you knew the Heyworths well,’ the Doctor said, his back to Wakeling. He didn’t need to see the scientist’s face to know he was about to make a good-natured protest. ‘After all, everybody knows everybody on Heritage.’

‘Knew, yes,’ Wakeling admitted grudgingly. ‘But "well".. ? I don’t think anybody really knew them *well*. They never really fitted in here, you understand.’

‘What happened to them?’ the Doctor asked, turning his grey eyes on Wakeling.

Just for a moment, the scientist looked flustered, and the Doctor suspected that this time it wasn’t an act. He didn’t meet the Doctor’s gaze, instead sliding his glasses off his face on the pretence of wiping the crimson dust from them.

‘They left,’ he said, still concentrating on his thin-rimmed spectacles.

The light glinted from them as they danced through his hands. ‘They got tired of the dust and moved to Sale, I think.

They’re probably working in the desalination plant right now.

Perhaps you should look for them there?’

The Doctor said nothing, just blinked.

He readjusted his umbrella in his grip, grasping it tightly by the red handle. So tightly his knuckles drained of colour.

‘I think I should get back to my friend,’ he announced coldly. ‘She’s been gone rather a long time.’

‘I do hope –’ Wakeling began, but the Doctor held up a finger to his lips.

‘All I want to do,’ he explained sternly, his eyebrows drawing together, ‘is find my friend and wait for our shuttle. I’m not looking for a mystery, I don’t have time for any games; I have other things on my mind. Please don’t say anything that might change my mind.’

And with that, the Doctor paced out of the room, without a single look back.

The raven cawed once, but Wakeling didn’t respond. He didn’t even glance around as the air filled with the sound of servos grinding and motors whining.

‘You see?’ came Bernard’s cultured voice. ‘I told you.’

Again, Wakeling said nothing.

‘What do you think would happen,’ Bernard continued, his voice betraying none of the urgency of his stance, ‘if he found out?’ Wakeling turned then, and fixed his glare on Bernard’s beady little eyes.

‘I know exactly what would happen,’ Wakeling said evenly.

‘He’d have a terrible, tragic accident.’

Chapter Six

6. August, 6048 CE

The Doctor walked, his hat pulled low. Whether he was keeping the sun or the sight of twitching curtains from his eyes, no one could be sure. He slowly put one foot in front of the other, barely disturbing the thin sand, and he walked. He walked so far that he soon left Heritage's dusty street behind him, although if he noticed, he didn't let it bother him. He just walked, with the sun at his back, looking like he didn't mind in the slightest where he ended up. Looking like he wasn't looking for anyone in particular.

Or perhaps he had seen the fledgling railway from the sky, and merely wanted a closer look. Yes, perhaps that was why –

after leaving Wakeling's home – the Doctor had walked calmly and silently out of Heritage.

Billy heaved the plasticrete sleeper from his shoulders and lowered it as best he could into the shallow foundations in the dirt. He didn't look at the newcomer at all, choosing instead to scrutinise his work, shifting it a few cautious millimetres until he was satisfied. Then – his face red with the effort – he straightened, brushing sand from his head and moustache. A firm slab of a hand was thrust the Doctor's way, and the little man had no choice but to shake it.

'Billy,' the red-faced wall said firmly.

'How do you do?' the Doctor replied. He turned to look back at the track; it ran a few metres along the sand, the last metre and a half just sleepers, no track. 'Did you do all this yourself?'

Billy smiled a cock-eyed smile, his wiry moustache twitching on his lip.

'Has it taken long?'

'Two years,' he answered. 'The hard part was finding fresh stock for the plasticrete. The rest's just grunt work.'

The Doctor nodded understandingly.

'You must be very proud,' he said. 'Where will it go, when it's finished?'

Billy turned to the west, and pointed. For a moment, it seemed that that would be his only answer, but then he spoke.



Softly, at first. Reverently, maybe.

‘Out there’s Sale. It’s a good two-week ride on horseback, is Sale. They’ve got fish out there – real fish all the way from Earth, swimming about in the sea like they were born there.

They send us some, sometimes; two weeks old and packed in ice.

One day, I’m going to bring back enough fish to give everyone in Heritage the meal of their lives. That morning’s catch, still wet from the sea. Soon as I get the railway finished.’

‘And nobody else helps you?’ the Doctor asked.

‘Too busy farming. Heritage’s made farmers out of most of us.’ The Doctor’s umbrella found its way back to his lips.

‘And you don’t think perhaps you should join them?’ he said softly.

Billy turned, his eyebrows drawing down over dark eyes. His face was still red from the exertions of his task, his quest. It made him look like he was about to grab the Doctor and throttle him for asking such a question.

‘I’m an engineer,’ he answered instead. ‘Only way I know to get food is to build you a machine that brings it to you.

Sometimes, you’ve just got to do what you can. Even if you don’t really think you can finish it. You’ve got to try.’

The Doctor said nothing at that, just a dark shadow, the sun at his back. If Billy could see the little man’s eyes, what would he find there? Who could know?

‘I’m looking for a man called Lee,’ the Doctor said, finally.

Billy pointed, and then lifted his spade again. It cut through the thin sand easily, hitting darker veins beneath. It wouldn’t take long to cut the foundations. Then it would be the back-breaking task of lugging the next sleeper into position. Then the next, and the next, all the way across the world and out to the glistening sea. The Doctor doffed his hat and walked silently away.

Ace let out a sigh as she readjusted her rucksack – carefully. It was getting hot now that the sun was high above, and she didn’t want to even think about what the temperature might do to the bag’s contents.

It wasn't her fault, of course – how was she meant to know that the Doctor was going to drag her to the Devil's Kitchen without the cool safety of the TARDIS nearby should anything start to overheat. So what if the Doctor was continually warning her about carrying certain items? He should be more specific about the dangers involved.

Okay, so if she went kablooeey it was her own fault.

At least if things did get thermal, she wouldn't have Lee on her conscience. He might have seemed enthusiastic in the morning sun, but it had turned out all he really wanted was to get Ace away from the paddock. As soon as they had reached his front yard, his enthusiasm had evaporated, and he'd all but begged Ace not to get the Doctor involved. There was something he wasn't telling her still, but she thought she had a rough outline of the problem. People go missing. Something takes people. All in a day's work for the magnificent Ace and her humble assistant the Professor. They travelled through history defeating Evil from the Dawn of Time – getting the better of a kidnapper in the universe's sandbox should just be a Sunday afternoon distraction for them.

All the same, Ace was relieved that she'd decided to get the Doctor's opinion. Not that she'd ever *ever* admit that. But it was still true.

So, despite his protestations, Ace had told Lee to sit tight and wait for her to get back, and then she'd set out in search of the Doctor. It shouldn't have been that difficult – the mood he'd been in recently, she didn't really think that he would've moved far from where she'd left him. It had been quite a surprise when she'd reached the bar and he wasn't there. It had been quite an annoyance when Cole had told her where he'd gone.

'He went looking for you,' he'd said.

Typical. He couldn't let a day go by without treating her like a little kid. What did he think was going to happen? Sunburn?

All that had dissipated when she finally found him, though.

'Professor!' she shouted from the end of the street, waving as if he needed his attention drawing to her. As if anybody else would be dressed in a heavy black bomber jacket in the heat of the midday sun and yelling out a name that wasn't even his.

He spun around in a second, and – just for a moment – Ace caught a look on his face. It was a look of relief like she'd never seen on his

face before, the sudden lifting of a weight so heavy that it reshaped the way he held his body. Typical! He couldn't leave her alone for five minutes without panicking that she'd got herself killed or kidnapped or something.

'Ace,' he said cheerfully, a smile quickly plastered over the relief. 'Been making friends?'

'Professor!' she said, a warning shot across his nose.

'Something's going on. Something bad.'

The Doctor's face brightened, as he vigorously shook his head.

'Nonsense, Ace. What could possibly be going on here? It's a paradise; the fresh air, the...' the Doctor paused, taking a look at the scenery. Rolling red dust sweeping down from foothills in the north, to flatlands in the south. 'The fresh air.'

'Professor,' Ace growled; it was obvious there would be no more warning shots. 'This is serious.'

The Doctor glared at her, suddenly grim. His eyes were cutting right through her, that way they did, that way that made her feel very small and very afraid. It was times like these that she truly understood that the Doctor wasn't like her, wasn't really anything like her at all, and not just in the ways that most grownups weren't like her. The Doctor was an alien, and when it came down to it there was no way she could guess what he would do next. And that scared her, just a little.

But no matter how frightened, she was still Ace; she matched his glare, held it firm.

'You have no idea,' he said finally. 'We should leave.'

'What?'

'We can't stay here, Ace. It's too dangerous.'

And with that, he turned his back on her and started walking down the road, his umbrella marking time in the dust beside him. For a moment, it was all Ace could do to keep her jaw from hanging slackly open, fly-catching in disbelief. This couldn't be the Doctor – her mind quickly skipped through the options; he was trying to goad her into something; he'd been replaced by an evil clone; he'd gone mad or bad or both. Somehow it just wouldn't go together. All she could think was

this wasn't her Doctor. This wasn't the man who walked unheeding into ground zero to protect the innocent. This wasn't the man who stared death or worse in the face to defeat the wicked. This wasn't the Doctor!

‘What d’you mean it’s too dangerous?’ she shouted, running after him. ‘You’d juggle hand grenades if you thought it would be fun. You’d drink Nitro-9 if you thought it’d keep me from it.’

What’s going on, Professor?’

‘Not this time, Ace,’ he murmured, his voice still reaching her ears regardless. ‘We can’t get involved.’

‘We have to!’ she yelled at him, still chasing to catch him up.

Somehow, he was always two steps ahead of her. ‘Professor.

Professor!’

He stopped, then. She was fighting back tears – could feel salt burning her eyes – but she wouldn’t let them free. She wouldn’t let him do this to her again. She still had her pride. She still had her faith. He’d done this a thousand times before, lied to her, hurt her, made her cry – stopped her being Ace. All for the greater good. All for a good so great, even she was forced to admit there was no other way. But not this time. He could deny her again if that’s what he needed; she’d still come bounding faithfully back to him when the time was right. But she wouldn’t cry for him. Not again.

He turned, and looked at her. Tears were welling in his eyes.

Let him cry for *her*, this time.

‘Professor, something’s wrong here,’ she said slowly, teaching a child that one plus one makes two. ‘No one’s talking to us, everybody wants us gone. Lee’s horses have gone missing.

*People* are missing. Lee’s boyfriend, your friends. Something’s wrong here, Professor, and we’ve got to put it back right. If we don’t, no one else here will.’

And she stood, so very un-Acelike with her arms limp at her sides and her deep brown eyes imploring, begging.

The Doctor couldn’t even look at her.

‘Fine,’ she sniffed, running a sleeve under her nose. She was *not* going to cry. ‘If you won’t help them, I will. You run away somewhere safe. I’ll come and find you when all this is over.’

And she turned, pulling her rucksack up on her shoulder, more to give her hands something to do. Before she knew it, she was running, her feet churning great clouds of dust into the air.

It was a smokescreen. No one could see her eyes redden and water as she ran, her nose start to run. No one could see her, especially not the Doctor. But she didn't cry. She at least had that much. She didn't cry. Instead, she ran, as fast as she could, to where she couldn't even see.

'Ace!' the Doctor shouted behind her, but she wasn't listening.

Sweetness sat at the top of the stairs. Experience had taught her that if she sat here, then she could hear everything that went on downstairs, but no one could see her. Not even Daddy's big nasty blackbird, the one that cawed and clacked its beak at her whenever she went too close. If she sat at the top of the stairs, hugging on to the banister with all her strength, then she was invisible. Only the sun could find her, streaming through the window, warming her all over everywhere. Except for that cold weight she carried around deep inside. Nothing had warmed that, yet. Perhaps nothing would.

Sweetness closed her eyes and listened, trying to imagine the scene below.

'Well?' asked nasty Bernard, his electric voice all calm and smoothlike.

Then a nothing, maybe the rustle of the big blackbird's feathers.

'I done what you asked,' the red-faced Sheriff, sounding snippy and frightened all together. 'Ain't no one heard of him.

Might take a while longer for the central planets to get in touch.'

Then:

'He said he wasn't interested in our secrets,' her Daddy said, sounding all museful like he sometimes got when she was helping him with his speriments.

'And you believed him?' the big fish laughed, a happy laugh that didn't fit with his eyes.

Another nothing, this one bigger. Sweetness could feel the hairs on her arms starting to rise, like they did just before Daddy stuck a needle in.

‘Sheriff, I want you to keep an eye on the Doctor for me.’

‘Now just listen here,’ Sweetness could see Sheriff’s cheeks blustering out in her head, like a grumpy hamster. ‘You don’t go ordering me around. I’m still the law around here. You don’t tell me what I do or don’t do, you hear?’

A chuckle now, a merry little thing. Sweetness recognised it as her Daddy. Neither of the others could sound that happy. Not here.

‘We both know that’s not true.’

‘What are you going to do about him, Professor?’ the big fish asked, not paying attention to what other people were doing as always. ‘He’s no one. You know that. He could disappear without anybody coming to find out where.’

Another nothing, this one the longest of the lot.

The Doctor hurried down the road, his plans of making it to the landing pad and waiting until morning abandoned. Everything obscured by the dust. It surrounded him, the proverbial red mist, only this anger wasn’t his; it was Ace’s.

Even as he hurried, he knew he had a tough decision ahead.

Did he go after her? It was only down the road and off to the right, or at least it was if she had headed back to Lee’s. If she had gone straight out to find her monsters, then she could be anywhere, be doing anything. Having anything done to her.

Something inside him shook, and urged him to hurry, to follow her footsteps before the sand shifted and he lost her forever. Or would it be better to try to do what he dared, taking her crusade away? Defeat the monsters by lighting the blue touch paper and retiring, taking her with him before the fireworks started.

The dust cleared, and the Doctor found himself at the end of the road.

Right; find Ace before anything happens. Straight ahead; bring an end to it, before anything happened. It seemed like such an easy choice, but then didn’t they all?

How he missed the days when he could settle such a dilemma with a simple toss of a coin. He had a double-headed Drachma that was just begging to be of use.

At the end of the road, the Doctor could see the door to Cole's shivering in the breeze. It was of course the only sensible option. Ace wouldn't take no for an answer: the only way to stop her prying was to take away the need. And that meant going to Cole's. It was the only way to make sure she was safe. But then.. what if something happened whilst he was gone? Every second she wasn't under his watchful eye was a second with the potential for catastrophe. The urge to follow her, to watch her, to keep her close was unbearable.

Then he remembered her eyes, red-rimmed and looking at him. It was the only sensible option.

Just for old time's sake, he pulled the coin out of his pocket and gave it a flip. He didn't even bother to look how it landed, just palmed it and headed back up the road, towards Cole's.

Cole stood behind his bar, staring at his reflection in the mirror.

He was still a young man – not quite pushing forty, not yet, anyways – and he still had a young man's body. Okay, mebbies it was a little *bigger* than a young man's body usually was, but it was in there, underneath all of it. He resisted the temptation to run his hand up to his head, feel the bristles wave through his fingertips like a cornfield in the wind. His eyes held him in a terrified gaze, madness flashing there.

He'd been a young man when he'd come to Heritage – too young, really, when he thought about it. Back then, he'd been bored with his life and didn't relish the idea of punching a clock on Io every week until he was eighty. Then he'd seen the Federation ad, and was drawn in by the lure of sun, sea and enough riches to swim in. Of course that was what was wrong with his life – he was living in the wrong climate, he wasn't his own boss, he needed a change. So he'd come to Heritage – failed the physical to be a miner, but had just enough experience to be offered the Bar Manager job. It was a dream come true.

Then Thydonium became worthless, and the Federation abandoned them, and now he was far more trapped than he'd ever been back home.

Now even his reflection disapproved.

As he looked in the mirror, he could see his world painted out before him. Bare boards, no character, slowly being eroded by the dust until nothing remained. The Fussies were scooting this way and that, doing



their best to fight back the planet. They were doomed to failure, but how were they to know? Of course, it wasn't just the planet they were fighting; Ed and Christa were sitting at one of the tables towards the back, amusing themselves by flipping the little robots onto their backs. They had evil laughs, those two; at once childish and chilling.

He wanted to tell them to stop, but occasionally they would look up and catch his eye.

You're part of this, their eyes would say. You're one of us.

There's no way back now.

And he knew it was true.

He supposed he could take the same route Sheriff favoured; after all, he was the one who brewed the vodka, he was the one with the keys to the cellar. That would be a release, of a sort. A way out, for a few hours every day. Trouble was, as he watched Sheriff pour the damned stuff down his neck, he couldn't help but feel disgusted by it. It wasn't right. And then when Bernard had announced he was following the Doctor, that Sheriff better had too, he'd just placed his glass down and scuttled right along.

Mebbies it wasn't the drink made him Wakeling's puppet, but it was a risk Cole didn't want to take.

'Aw, tits,' he sighed to his reflection.

Behind him, the swing doors clattered, announcing the Doctor's arrival. He stood in the entrance for a moment, his eyes flicking to Christa and Ed. They stopped their games with the Fussies and watched him, cautiously. Something flashed across the little man's face, just for a moment, and then he politely raised his hat to the two of them. No response, of course, but Cole had the feeling he'd done it more for him than those two anyways.

'What can I get you, Doctor?' Cole said amiably, the smile already back on his face before he'd turned around.

The little man smiled, a smile of such warmth it made Cole feel guilty just to be on the receiving end of it. There was no way he deserved a greeting like that.

'Just a glass of water, please,' he said, ambling over to the bar.

‘Aye,’ Cole said, reaching into the fridge.

‘And a favour,’ the Doctor said in a whisper, slipping casually onto one of the bar stools.

Cole glanced cautiously over at Ed and Christa. They were glaring right back.

‘Ah, yes. Preferably without too much interference from anybody else,’ the Doctor added, catching Cole’s glance.

Cole made a decision, vowing to look in the mirror again as soon as the Doctor was gone, just to see if it had got any easier.

‘What d’you want?’ he mumbled, pouring the Doctor’s drink.

‘I need to make an off planet call. Could you arrange that for me?’

Cole felt his heart stop. For a second, it felt like it would never start again.

He swallowed hard. It felt like he’d just eaten Bernard, walker and all.

It occurred to him then that his life had been made up of moments like this. Brief moments that begged a decision from him, without the luxury of time to think about it. Leaving Io, coming here; that had been one of those moments. Staying here when the mining business went tits up; that had been one of those moments. And this, this was definitely one of those moments. Are you with them, or are you with me, the Doctor was asking, and he had only the moment to consider. Deep down inside, he knew what he wanted the answer to be, but he only had a moment. That was the trouble with snap decisions –

they always showed what you really were, rather than what you wanted to believe you were.

Cole remembered another decision, a few years back.

He thought about the light blazing in to illuminate that night, and blowing away the cobwebs they’d let grow up around it.

‘All the lines’re busy right now,’ he heard himself say. ‘Tell you the truth, Sheriffs got them burning hot tryin’ to find out about you.’

‘Ah, yes.’ The Doctor was no fool then. He’d known they’d been asking questions. He leaned closer, heedless of Ed and Christa rising to their feet behind him. ‘This is a very important call.’

Cole shut his eyes, trying to block out the universe around him. It was only seeing it that made it live, only believing that made history real.

Tears pricked at the corners of his eyes.

‘Listen, Doctor,’ Cole said quietly, ‘mebbies you’d better not.

Just get as far away from here as you can. Don’t get involved in what’s going on here.’

Cole opened his eyes, deep chestnut, pleading with the Doctor. The Doctor was leaning in, his grey eyes alive with curiosity, his fingers twitching as if he could reach in and pluck the answer from Cole’s unwilling breast.

‘And just what is going on here?’ he asked.

The swing doors creaked open, protesting as Sheriff walked through them.

The Doctor didn’t turn, keeping his eyes locked on Cole, but it was no good. Whatever spell might have been woven between them was shattered by the lawman’s arrival. Cole glanced over at Sheriff, then across the room to Ed and Christa. The young man was relaxing back in his chair, his woman resting on his knee with an arm hanging limply around his shoulder. Their eyes were like glass as they remained fixed on Cole. He knew he was outnumbered.

‘I need to make that call,’ the Doctor whispered urgently.

‘Please let me know when a line becomes free. Before they do something we’ll all regret.’

Then the little man was beaming again, spinning around to greet the new arrival. Sheriff stood, his red face slack and emotionless, his short hair dew-specked with sweat. His duster was living up to its name, the red dust clinging to it, catching the afternoon light. Beneath it, the dust was starting to invade the loose jeans and shirt he was wearing too. Sheriff’s eyes glittered and stared, not moving from the Doctor for a second. There was barely contained terror in there; Cole wasn’t the only one worried by the Doctor’s arrival.

‘Doctor,’ Sheriff said evenly.

‘Sheriff, so nice to see you again. I don’t suppose you’ve bumped into my friend on your travels have you?’

‘Can’t say that I have,’ Sheriff replied flatly. His voice sounded more mechanical than Bernard’s did.

‘No, I don’t suppose you can,’ the Doctor mused, still smiling broadly. ‘Well, she’ll just have to look after herself for a few moments longer.’

The grin disappeared, and the Doctor’s brow sank.

‘I’m certain that nothing will happen to her.’

The way he said it, it sounded like a warning. Cole held onto the bar to steady himself; metal fingers bit into the veneer.

‘Now then,’ announced the Doctor to the bar in general,

‘should anybody feel like threatening me, or just giving some friendly "advice", I think I’ll be in my room.’

Cole saw the Doctor bob slightly as he turned back to the stairs, and half expected him to bow. Instead he walked calmly up the stairs, four pairs of eyes on him on every step, and disappeared through the door to the rooms. Cole almost sighed as the little man vanished, but his hand still gripped at the bar as if the room was spinning. Sheriff walked in and eased his ample bulk onto one of the cushioned stools. Christa watched him expressionlessly from Ed’s lap, the shaven-headed man absentmindedly gnawing on her neck whilst his hand investigated her thighs.

‘Vodka,’ Sheriff said, and Christa snorted. She turned her attention to Ed, her hand pressing against his broad chest.

Cole reached under the bar and pulled out an unmarked glass bottle, half full with transparent liquid. Finest Cole vodka, fine-filtered once through whichever shirt was cleanest at the time of brewing. His hand shook as he unscrewed the top and poured a single measure into a slender shot glass.

‘What’re you gonna do, Sheriff?’ Cole asked in an urgent whisper. ‘They’ll kill him. You know that, don’t you. Aye, they’ll kill him and feed his eyes to Wakeling’s bird. And it’ll be just as much our fault as it is theirs.’

Sheriff said nothing, his sausage fingers caressing the delicate glass. He tilted it and watched the thick liquid gather up at the sides, a flood.

‘You are gonna do summut, aren’t you Sheriff?’ Cole hissed, glancing nervously over to Ed and Christa. The dark eyed woman’s black dress was slowly inching up her leg. ‘Don’t you feel even a little guilty about what happened?’

Sheriff’s head jerked up, his eyes red-lined and screaming.

‘You’d better leave the bottle,’ was his only answer.

Cole shook his head slowly, and went back to trying to meet his own eyes in the mirror.

He still couldn’t do it.

## Chapter Seven

6. August, 6048 CE

12:37

*‘The trouble with dolphins – Cetaceans, rather – is their reputation; for centuries mankind has viewed them as graceful, peaceful and elegant creatures. It was only when we learnt to translate their language that we discovered what truly disagreeable creatures they could be; it’s so much harder to idolise a race when one of them is threatening to bite your nose off unless you take back what you said about its mother.’*

Dr Vicky Kate,

in *Talk to the Animals*, the memoirs of the first human to translate the Cetacean language.

Ace sat outside Lee’s house, her feet slipping into the dust until they were invisible. Her bag was lying lazily behind her, basking next to her abandoned coat. All she needed was a few moments to regain her composure. Or at least stop herself heaving like a six-year-old about to throw a tantrum. She pushed her hands into the sand, feeling it shift and press against her fingers. It slipped away, sliding from her touch.

She pulled out a handful of sand and flung it as far as she could. It caught in the air, spreading out like a cloud. The wind blew it back at her, the red cloud raining dust into her mouth, her hair, her eyes. She coughed, the dust rasping in her throat, choking. It didn’t ease her sense of frustration.

Perhaps she was just a little girl, kicking and screaming because she

hadn't got her own way. Perhaps this was too dangerous for her, and the Doctor knew it. Perhaps he'd only been humouring her all this time, indulging her desire for adventure and excitement but not letting her do anything *really* dangerous. After all, when it came down to it, how many times had she beaten the bad guy? And how many times had she raged in blindly and disrupted all the Doctor's carefully laid plans?

Perhaps he was finally getting sick of her, and the next trip would be back home, to Perivale, to Mum.

Perhaps somewhere, there was a part of Ace that wanted that.

Ace thrust her hands further into the fine red sand, her fingers spreading out like roots. The sand parted easily, as if inviting her to join it, to sink down further and further until she was nothing but dry red dust, spread out across the planet so thinly it was impossible for her to have another sentient thought.

Envy the life of dust; it is at least simple. She could feel her eyes starting to sting again, her eyes desperate to share their moisture with the dry earth below. Perhaps if she started now, she'd cry out all her water and become just a husk, brittle in the breezes, waiting to collapse.

Perhaps that was what had happened to the planet, to turn it into such a dry, desolate hole.

Ace pulled her hands from the sand, sending the dust airborne again. It rained through the sunlight, twinkling like stardust. She sniffed loudly and pulled herself to her feet, her hands smoothing down the creases in her short black skirt. She scowled at the horizon, a far-away blur only distinguishable by the change in colour, not by any distant landmarks. This wasn't her, she told herself. This wasn't Ace. If this was how she was going to face the universe on her own, then maybe it would be better if she did catch the first train home. She didn't deserve the adventure.

She wiped her face with the back of her hand, careful to keep the sand from her eyes. Then she reached down and hefted her rucksack back over her shoulder, plucking up her discarded jacket with the other hand. So the Professor wasn't interested in solving mysteries. So he was playing some guarded game of his own. So what? There were people out there who needed her help, and they wouldn't get it if she sat on her arse feeling sorry for herself all day.

‘Come on, Ace,’ she told herself. ‘We’ve got work to do.’

Her jaw set, Ace headed back towards Lee’s shack.

Cole should have been pleased; the bar was busier than it had been in weeks. Not even one yet, and three customers. Okay, so only one of them was really paying for his drink, but Sheriff was drinking more than enough for the three of them, so it all balanced out. He’d started with a few favours promised, just one per shot. Now he was working his way towards his second bottle, and Cole had insisted he put his name to a release. Once the drinking was over, the barman could decide what was owed.

On a colony that didn’t have a legal tender, it was the equivalent of a blank cheque. By the end of the afternoon, Sheriff would probably have drunk enough for Cole to get him to clean the still, piece by piece by piece.

Yes, Cole’s was busier than it had been in weeks, but it was also quieter than it had been when it was empty. The atmosphere in the bar seemed to leech all sound out of the air. Even the Fussies’ muted hum was silenced as they went about their ceaseless task. The tension was growing until it was the only thing left alive in the bar; it pressed against all of them, pushing them further and further apart. If there was a noise now, Cole would probably jump clean into the rooms above. Cole didn’t want to think about the rooms above, or their occupant.

Sheriff lifted his bottle again and poured more than a double, one step closer to his date with the still. Cole couldn’t look at him any more, their Sheriff, their lawgiver, their conscience.

At the far end of the bar, Ed and Christa were still wound in each other. She was straddled across him now, her long, black skirt tight against her legs, his handlebar moustache bristling against her pale face. Her crocheted shawl was entwined in his long, leather jacket, discarded on the wooden floor. The heavy leather had landed on the back of a Fussie, pinning it to the floor as it strained to be elsewhere, fulfilling its purpose. They hadn’t noticed, alone in the universe.

Ed and Christa made Cole uneasy. He had watched them grow on Heritage, from babes in arms to little more than children now. Their parents had been so pleased that they got on so well as children; they grew with a closeness that one would have expected from brother and sister, but couldn’t predict in stepchildren. As children, they had been

sweet little things, always up to some harmless mischief and coming home with scuffed knees and torn clothes.

Then they had grown, and their closeness became the muttered talk of the bar. Before their parents had disappeared, they had at least been discreet about it. Cole doubted it was to save their parent's blushes; once they hit teenage years, they became trouble. Once Ed's mother and Christa's father were one more troubled memory, however, Ed and Christa made no pretence at secrecy. Anybody who spoke up about it – even a whispered comment in the privacy of their home – well, that was somebody who would be visited by misfortune of one kind or another.

It was hardly their fault. Heritage was no place to bring up children. It was little wonder they turned out as they did. Little wonder they'd gravitated to Bernard as surely as they'd gravitated to each other.

Christa turned and fixed Cole with a burning look, whilst Ed was hypnotised by her chest. She gave a broad wink, and turned back to Ed's waiting lips.

Little more than children, and Cole was terrified of them.

A sound finally invaded the stillness of the bar, setting Cole's heart pounding again. It was the creak of dust-filled limbs straining to move, the same sound he heard every time he tried to use his robotic arm for anything more than show. It wasn't Cole's arm making the noise now. No, this was coming from outside, something coming down the dusty road. Cole busied himself making a quick stock-check of the bottles behind the bar. He recognised the sound of course; one good thing about Bernard was that it was impossible for him to sneak up on anyone, at least on Heritage.

The swing doors swung, and Bernard was carried into the bar on his metal walker.

'Sheriff,' his even voice said calmly, but Cole could hear the agitation in the clicks and claks the dolphin actually spoke. 'I thought you were meant to be watching the stranger.'

'He's upstairs,' Sheriff mumbled, not taking his eyes from his drink. It said something for his constitution that his voice was only slightly slurred.

'And you've checked that, have you?' the dolphin asked, his tail beginning to chop the air. 'You've made sure he's not gone out the



window? Or slipped right by while you drink yourself blind?’

That was the only problem with Bernard’s translator; it really never knew when it should be shouting. Whatever was being said, the words still came out in that same calm, plummy voice, as if the dolphin was politely asking if anyone would care for another sip of tea. But there was no mistaking the murderous intent in his black little eyes. They glistened and gleamed like stars, lit by the possibility of violence.

‘No, I haven’t,’ Sheriff said, spinning around so fast on his bar stool that his duster whipped against the dolphin’s metal legs. ‘Maybe I don’t care any more. Maybe I’m sick of being told what to do by a fish in a cage. Maybe, just maybe, it’s time somebody found out what Heritage is really like, and made it right.’

At the back of the bar, Ed and Christa broke away from each other, something more exciting to concentrate on.

Underneath Bernard’s belly, something clicked as a bullet slid automatically into each pistol’s firing chamber.

Cole moved nervously to one side, out of the crossfire.

‘Really?’ said Bernard, his voice comically out of sync with the situation.

Sheriff just spun back round on his stool and finished his drink in one swallow. Nobody in the bar could see, except for Cole, that he closed his eyes then, bracing for the impact of the bullets. Perhaps he was smiling, too, or perhaps the drink and the adrenaline had taken control of his face. Cole couldn’t be sure. Not for definite.

‘I’ll be upstairs if anyone needs me,’ Bernard said, and paced over to the stairs.

Sheriff let out a breath and opened his eyes, before refilling his glass.

Ed and Christa just grinned at each other, and carried on where they’d left off.

Cole, however, didn’t relax.

He hadn’t heard Bernard’s guns stand down. The dolphin’s walker was still locked and loaded, and Bernard was heading upstairs. To the Doctor.

As Lee sat staring blindly out of his window, he saw the sand whirl and dance, taunting him with its joy. Nothing else out there moved; Heritage was dead, and even the scavengers couldn't bring themselves to pick at its diseased flesh.

Lee remembered when he and Ryan had first arrived on Heritage, the first steps they'd taken off the shuttle and onto the red sand. Ryan had taken his shoes and socks off, desperate to feel the sand between his hairy toes, to get close to the planet.

Lee had laughed at that, but had joined him anyway. He wanted Ryan to look back on that day, when they'd grown old and brittle together, and remember that it had been perfect.

Heritage was a chance at a second start for them. For all of the colonists, he supposed, but for him and Ryan especially. It would be new and fresh here, without Ryan's mother giving everything a sour taste; she didn't approve, didn't want her darling boy to marry a hairy-arsed miner, didn't really want her son *being* a hairy-arsed miner if she could help it. Lee had always suspected that she'd hoped Ryan would grow out of his career if she just indulged him for a few years. Then Lee had ruined it all by coming along and giving him another tie to the lifestyle.

Ryan had been beautiful back then; lean and lithe with shoulders broad enough to fall asleep on. His face had a look to it – not model beautiful, but with an inner fire that sparked whenever he had smiled. It had been that smile that had made Lee fall in love with him, flashing like white fire, like the heart of the sun. Ryan was still beautiful now; he would never age, trapped inside his photo frames, whilst Lee's hair had already flecked and greyed in the years since his disappearance. How many more years would Ryan remain ageless, before Lee finally succumbed and ceased to age himself?

Looking out of the window, Lee jumped as Ace appeared, giving him a cheery wave and motioning for him to open the door. Poor girl; she was just a child – didn't realise what was lying in wait for her. Didn't know that the years would cling to her, skeletons weighing her down until she couldn't bear to move any more. Didn't know the dangers of kicking open doors and letting the sun race in where darkness had lived for years.

With a sigh, he got up to let her in.

'Okay,' she said enthusiastically, the moment the door was opened,

‘here’s the plan. We go on a monster hunt.’

‘Come in, Ace,’ Lee sighed, and returned to his chair.

She followed him into the small front room, practically bouncing with excitement. Lee lowered himself into his threadbare armchair – the one Ryan had made for himself soon after their arrival – and tried to appear interested. He hadn’t realised how young this girl actually was: believing so completely in monsters and demons. As she got older, perhaps she’d begin to understand that there were really only people, and the decisions they made. And the consequences they had to live with, years after they’d grown into whole different people.

‘Ace,’ he started, trying to sound firm.

‘No,’ she interrupted. ‘We haven’t got time, Lee. We’ve got to do something. Some *thing* is taking people some *where* for some *reason*, and if we don’t find out what, where and why then...well, I don’t know what yet, but it’s usually something bad.’

‘Ace, I’m sorry. I’m sorry that something I said has made you leap to these conclusions, but believe me; you’re mistaken.’

But the girl wouldn’t be told. She shook her head, dismissing the words almost before they’d been spoken.

‘No, it’s alright. I’ve done this sort of thing before,’ she said.

‘I know you’re probably frightened, but I can help. I know all about monsters. Evil. Things that like crawling around in the dark, hiding from...’

Ace stopped, her eyes suddenly bright. Which could only mean trouble.

‘The mines!’ she announced, all but slapping her forehead.

‘It’s obvious! Whatever it is, it’ll be down in the dark. The mines.’

The mines. Goddess no.

‘No, Ace,’ Lee said sternly, his heart pounding. ‘There’s nothing out on the ’Flats, and I can’t have you wandering around out there on your own. It’s too dangerous, the mines are old, and nobody’s been taking care of them these last few years. They could cave in around you before you’ve even got a foot inside.’

Ace had stopped bouncing. She was looking at him with a strange look in her eyes; he prayed silently that it was a look of contrition, that his outburst had had the desired effect.

‘The ‘Flats?’ she asked innocently.

‘Adobe Flats,’ Lee answered cautiously. ‘Where the mines were.’

A spark lit in Ace’s eyes. Lee didn’t know what he’d said, but it had had exactly the opposite effect from the one desired. The young girl’s jaw was set; he could tell she was more determined than ever to explore the mines. What did she know about the

‘Flats? Too late to wonder now – she was already at the door.

‘Are you coming?’ she asked over her shoulder.

It took Lee a good few moments to come up with an answer.

Bernard crept along the corridor above the main bar, painfully aware of the creaking of his exoskeleton as the dust ground into the gears, threatening to clog them at each step. He’d have to get Wakeling to arrange an overhaul any day now; he wasn’t looking forward to it. Every second spent out of the walker was a second where he was vulnerable, immobile. A second where he was just a big fish, flapping about on the sand.

Better to stand up to the world like a man, two pistols at your belly and fire in your eyes.

Bernard checked the status of the pistols; a sonar sensor beeped to let him know they were in perfect condition. Wouldn’t do to have a misfire.

To be quite honest, Bernard couldn’t understand why Wakeling hadn’t just ordered this the moment the strangers had stepped off the shuttle. It was the only obvious solution; neutralise the problem before it got out of hand. He supposed that was the difference between them; Wakeling was a thinker, always tinkering about with some equation or experiment; Bernard was a man of action, a doer. They were nobodies

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anyone could see that; nobody who was anybody came within a million light years of Heritage. It was the graveyard of the universe, but it was his to rule.

All they needed to do was make sure no one rocked the boat.

After the Doctor was dealt with, Sheriff would probably be the next to receive a little discipline. And then everything could get back to normal.

Sheriff Bernard had a nice ring to it, the dolphin mused idly.

He was outside the door now. He paused for a second, checking the status of the guns again. An almost inaudible whistle confirmed they were still ready and waiting. Bernard hated that little whistle, hated the natural assumption that those who had to use the walkers would be happier with sonar instrumentation, rather than a visual display like any other person would use. It made him angry, and when he got angry, somebody would suffer. His tail flicked in anticipation, his fins carefully controlling the walker's limbs.

One kick and the door was open.

One flick, and the pistols under his belly let rip.

He could feel the heat from them spreading up through his moist body. It felt good.

The bullets pumped out, one after the other. As soon as one was fired, another was automatically kicked into place from the store in his left leg. As soon as the next was discharged, another kicked into place. Bernard turned slowly, letting the bullets tear through the room, sending debris and furniture flying into the air. Bernard gave a little chuckle, but the computer failed to translate in all the excitement.

Downstairs, Cole heard the gunfire, and slid down to the floor behind the bar. His metal hand joined the other and cradled his head as he tried to block the noise out of his ears.

He failed, with each shot.

Episode Two

Chapter Eight

6. August, 6048 CE

13:00

With a single kick from his metal leg, the door burst open. The guns beneath his belly grew burning hot – drying his grey skin –

as they spat fire into the room. The furniture, the walls, the air, danced with the impact of the bullets, until there was nothing left of the room but a fine covering of debris. But still he didn't stop; bullet after bullet flew out of the pistol's muzzles, each accompanied by a flash of flame. Bernard knew his duty. He knew what had to be done, and he was the only one of them who was man enough to do it.

The guns silenced, no longer spitting fire. Instead, a fine trickle of red sand fell from them.

A high-pitched squeal just behind his blowhole told Bernard the guns had jammed. It didn't come as much of a surprise; he was lucky if he could pass a week on Heritage without some part of his walker becoming clogged with dust. It was too fine; it could work its way through the smallest of cracks, and once inside the machine – any machine – it would either soak up the lubricant until it was an unmoving sludge, or else fuse into solid lumps as the electrics shorted through it. The timing could have been better, but at least he had done what he came here to do.

'I imagine that would be very annoying. Just when you were enjoying yourself,' said the Doctor, just off to Bernard's left. 'I could give you a hand, if you'd like.'

Bernard turned.

He was looking down at the Doctor, still wearing his hat and coat, sitting on his haunches beside the door. In his hands was one of the cleaner robots, frozen solid as if unsure where to start on all this glorious mess. The Doctor picked up the remains of a vase that had landed at his side and threw it against the far wall.

It shattered into three equal pieces, before dropping to the floor.

'There,' said the Doctor. 'Is that better?'

Bernard decided it was time to investigate the possibilities of silent running.

Lee stumbled through the sands as best he could, his eyes flicking across the horizon. He could see Ace's silhouette there, flickering as the desert heat tried to eat her whole. Every now and then, she would stop, one hand dropping to her waist, the other shading her eyes. Enshrouded in the haze, Lee could almost believe she was a woman – a warrior, a hero – searching out evil and with the strength and power to put it to rest. He could still see her in his room, though: tired and

scared, a little girl with eyes still red from tears shed earlier.

He was catching her up – slowly – but it was taking its toll.

He could feel his heart pounding and his chest burn. When did he get so old? Back in the mines, this would have been the warm-up before he and Ryan started work for the day. Now it felt like it might be the last thing he ever did. Or did he feel that way because of the circumstances?

‘Ace,’ he called out, finally putting his pride aside.

She turned, a hole burnt into his retina by the sun, a blackness that regarded him with invisible eyes. Her hands were on her hips again, her head cocked to one side.

‘Come on then,’ she shouted back at him. ‘Catch up.’

Oh, so *that* was all he needed to do. Why hadn’t he thought of that forty metres earlier?

He would’ve shouted something back, but the words burned in his throat.

He stumbled on for a good few more metres, until finally he was at Ace’s side. She’d taken off her jacket again, tying the arms around her waist so that the back came down further than her skirt did. She was wearing a loose white T-shirt with a messy spiral pattern printed on the front. It looked like someone had attacked the T-shirt with different-coloured dyes and then left it to dry. At least it was reasonably sensible for the heat though, and the loose sleeves didn’t show any signs of how much she’d been sweating. Unlike his own shirt and jeans combination which now looked like he’d been caught in a downpour.

Ace didn’t even seem to notice his discomfort, looking sternly into the distance instead.

‘The first thing we’ll need to do,’ she announced, ‘is find an entrance to one of the mines. I’ve got some torches and stuff in my bag – not enough if we’ve got to go caving, but I bet the mines’re still in pretty good shape, yeah?’

‘The first thing we need to do,’ Lee said, panting slightly, ‘is go back to the shack and have a nice cup of tea.’

Ace looked at him, the traitor revealed.

‘No way,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘I’m going to find out what’s going on here. I’m –’

‘You’re going to get yourself killed,’ Lee said calmly, levelly.

He was surprised he could manage it, the way he felt.

‘Trust me,’ she said breezily. ‘I do this sort of thing all the time.’

Lee shook his head, his eyebrows knitting together.

‘No, listen to me. I used to do this for a living. It’s too dangerous out there. The mines are dangerous places at the best of times. The supports give out, water leaks through the sand and erodes the rock beneath. They’re dark and they’re dank and if you don’t know where you’re going, one false turn could end up with you dead. And that is if they were at peak condition.

Those mines haven’t been used in years, decades. They’re old, Ace. They’re brittle. The weight of one rat on the surface could bring them down, let alone you stomping across them. It’s too dangerous, Ace. Let’s go home.’

Ace looked at him, her brown eyes locked onto his. From this distance, he could see how fresh and young her skin was, how clear her eyes were, how her face still had a trace of the child about it. Wait until her skin was dry and grey, exfoliated every day by abrasive sand. See how keen she was to go pushing through everybody’s business then, once the dirt of ages had built up under her fingernails.

She spoke, and he knew what she was going to say.

‘No,’ she said firmly. ‘Something in those mines is making people vanish. People like the Doctor’s friends. People like Ryan.

D’you want everyone to go through what you did when he went missing, or do you want me to stop it, right here, right now?’

‘Whatever you do won’t bring Ryan back,’ he said, but he knew she wasn’t going to give in until he told her. Until he scraped back his dry old skin and exposed the raw wounds to the harsh air again.

‘But we can find what took him,’ she said.

The air was stinging Lee’s eyes now, pricking them with tears. That



was his excuse.

‘You want to find what killed Ryan? Fine, I’ll show you.’ He pointed to the horizon, where the air shimmered and danced just to taunt them. ‘That’s what killed Ryan. The mines. They killed him, and you can’t punish them because they’re already dead!’

He grabbed her then, thin fingers pressing firmly into fleshy shoulders. He hadn’t meant to, hadn’t wanted to, but still he had.

He grabbed her hard, shook her, spun her until she was held, silently staring into the afternoon sun. Across the desert and over to the ‘Flats, and the mines barely visible black holes, half masked by the intensity of the sun. She let out a gasp, but he wasn’t listening any more. He had to make her see, for her own sake. For everyone’s.

‘When the mines closed down, it killed Ryan. It killed all of Heritage. Those of us that remain are nothing but scavengers living from the dead flesh. They were dank, dark, dangerous holes, those mines. But to a miner, there was something soothing about them. They were our homes, they fed us, they clothed us, and they helped us to do the same for our families.

When they closed...Ryan was spending more and more time there, as if by staying in them he could keep them alive. But they’re dead, and now so is he. Do you see? They killed him.’

He shook her again, barely thinking now.

‘Do you see?’ he repeated, emphasising every word, hitting each one home like a pick.

Ace shook herself out of his grasp, rounding on him with a snarl. With an *actual* snarl – lips pulled back to hiss at him like a cat, revealing perfect white teeth. There was a fire in her eyes, no trace of the little girl he’d tried to frighten into submission.

Looking at her now, he could believe she’d fought monsters.

Looking at her, he could believe that she’d become one herself in the battle. Goddess help her. He couldn’t help but take a step back.

‘He might have gone there willingly,’ she growled, ‘but there’s something down there. And that something took him from you. I can feel it.’

‘There’s *nothing* down there,’ he insisted, but quieter now, less forceful. His hands remained at his sides. ‘I’ve looked for him often enough. Now it’s time to let him go. Get on with our lives.’

‘Like you have?’

‘I...I’m too old for new beginnings.’

As quickly as she appeared, the grown-up Ace disappeared, leaving a confused young girl in her place. Suddenly, she was not so sure. Suddenly, the fire washed out of her eyes, leaving her with only uncertainty with which to face Lee.

‘If it’s safe enough for you to look,’ she said, finally, ‘then it’s safe enough for me to look.’

And she set her jaw firm. Without the feline anger in her eyes, though, the effect was less than convincing.

‘Unless you want to come with me?’ she added, hopefully.

Lee didn’t answer straight away. In fact, he didn’t answer at all.

Okay, so it wasn’t the most convincing hit Bernard had ever been involved with. So it was furniture, bed-linen and knick-knacks that had borne the brunt of the offensive, their broken bodies carpeting the floor, falling between the cracks in the floorboards. Okay, so the Doctor was alive and well and looking curiously up at the dolphin, a look of fear very far from creeping into his eyes. That didn’t mean the attempt had to be a complete washout.

Bernard flicked the wooden door shut with his tail, and angled his walker so that he could stare down his nose at the Doctor.

The little man doffed his hat politely. The Fussy in his arms burbled excitedly, still eager to begin the clean-up operation.

Nothing else moved in the whole universe.

Bernard could tell he was flogging a dead horse.

‘You’d better get out of here,’ his electronic voice burbled, not quite adept with threats despite the frequent practice.

‘The room?’ the Doctor enquired politely, ‘Or the town?’

‘The planet,’ Bernard corrected sternly, his tiny eyes shrinking.

‘Or else?’

The dolphin didn’t answer, just flicked his head idly to take in a panoramic view of the room. The cradle didn’t move, its silvered bulk still towering over the Doctor. Bernard had angled it perfectly so that the sunlight barging in through the broken window glinted off the barrels of the walker’s pistols. The little black eyes directed the Doctor to take note of the destruction, as if it had only ever been intended as a warning.

‘Very impressive,’ agreed the Doctor, slowly unfolding until he was upright. ‘If you manage to get the mechanisms unclogged, I’ll be sure to be intimidated.’

He smiled charmingly, and let the Fussy drop to the floor. It immediately hummed over to the shattered porcelain and began to feast. From the corners of the room, more of the little robots began to advance, pulling themselves out of darkness like insects.

They chittered and burbled as they began to clear the debris: to themselves, to each other, who could actually be sure?

‘In a few moments,’ the Doctor said, darkly, ‘there’ll be very little left to see of your warning.’

Bernard turned his glistening eyes back to the imp, his heart starting to pound faster.

‘Have you ever seen what a walker can do to somebody who gets in its way?’ Bernard asked, the translator making it sound like an after-dinner speculation. ‘Very nasty.’

The Doctor brought his umbrella up to his mouth, pressing his lips absent-mindedly against the gleaming red handle. He nodded, very slightly.

‘But you’re not going to do that, are you?’ he breathed softly.

Bernard shook his head in bemusement, baring his teeth to show he found the suggestion amusing, like any other person would. His walker misinterpreted the gesture, however, and translated it into a step backwards.

‘Don’t be so sure,’ he said quickly, but the mood had been broken. The Doctor took a step forward, bringing his chest one step closer to the dolphin. Bringing those dancing fingers within easy reach of Bernard’s

sharp, predatory bite. He didn't appear concerned in the least.

'Oh, I am sure,' the Doctor countered. 'Do you know who I am?'

Bernard snorted, and tried not to wonder what it would sound like to the Doctor's ears.

'No,' the Doctor mused, 'I didn't think you did. And neither does...'

The Doctor paused, then smiled; he was taunting Bernard, the Cetacean suddenly realised. He knew exactly on whose behalf the dolphin was carrying out orders. He had piercing eyes, this strange little man; they looked through where they shouldn't.

'Your employer,' the Doctor continued, a concession to the thin veil of secrecy he was pretending to be wrapped in, 'doesn't know who I am either. And he won't be stupid enough to do anything to me until he can be sure it won't get him into even more trouble. No, this was your idea.'

The Doctor indicated the slowly disappearing debris, a half smile indicating how enlightened he considered the idea to be.

Bernard was losing the edge here, the initiative sailing away from him. This wasn't right; wasn't he the one who burst in all guns blazing? The Doctor should be begging for his life now. The Doctor should be lying on the floor with his windpipe crushed beneath a cold metal foot, whilst the Fussies busied themselves drinking his blood.

But then what if he was right? Would Wakeling be angry with him?

'Leave,' Bernard repeated, his mind whirring.

The Doctor leaned in closer, the brim of his hat tapping against Bernard's grey forehead.

'Tell me what happened here.'

The dolphin snorted again; no way was he falling for that one. 'Let me guess?' Bernard's synthesiser mused. 'You make it easier on me if I tell you everything? We can cut a deal?'

The Doctor paced forwards again, suddenly. So suddenly, Bernard found himself automatically taking a step backwards, almost crushing a Fussy beneath his heavy foot. He wanted to hiss again, wanted to snap his teeth and swish his tail, or grab the stranger and beat him to

a pulp with his own bare hands, like a man. He didn't do any of those. He was too busy backing away from the look in his eyes.

‘No,’ the Doctor growled, his face a shadow. ‘No deals.

There's no easy way out of this. You did something here, you and your friends, a long time ago. Something so terrible that it killed this planet stone-dead. You know what you did. You can feel it, in there, eating at you. You tell me what happened, and it might make it easier. But it will never go away.’

Bernard's whole body twitched, from teeth to tail. It was instinct; he was trying to flip away from this dangerous predator, twist in the water and swim away. Up, down, left, right; it didn't matter. All that mattered was escape. But escape was impossible

– Bernard was surrounded by thin Heritage air, not buoyant silky water.

The Doctor stepped forward, teeth glinting like a shark's.

‘Our actions shape us,’ he intoned. ‘Our past shapes us. As much as you try to deny it, you can't escape it. If your cradle was to stop supporting you, stop pumping its mist over your skin, you'd dry up and die before the sun set tonight. Deny your past, and it will destroy you.’

There was nothing now, nothing in the room but those two grey orbs, getting closer and closer, larger and larger. They swam in his vision, became his only focus. He could do nothing but see them, hear them, breathe.

‘Tell me what you did,’ the Doctor insisted.

Bernard didn't answer straight away. In fact, he didn't answer at all.

A million miles away from the Doctor, a million miles away from Lee, a million miles away from anything, and Ace stood in the middle of the desert and burned.

The sun was directly overhead now, and the amount of heat it was giving off, Ace could very well believe she was carrying it in her rucksack. She could feel her shoulders, her nose, beginning to redden and peel. If the Doctor had mentioned they'd be coming to the middle of the Sahara, then she could've brought some factor 40 from the TARDIS before they'd set out.

If he'd have mentioned that he was going to go all timid and *grown-up* on her, she could've come up with a battle plan, made a few preparations, rather than just grabbing her rucksack and jacket without checking the contents, and away.

She could, of course, put her coat on now, just to save her blistering shoulders. Trouble with that was, the badges were mostly metal and tended to keep the heat particularly well. That and the black fabric, and she'd be a soggy patch in the sand in seconds. So, skin cancer or dehydration; what an appealing choice.

Hefting her rucksack determinedly, she continued walking –

alone – towards the open wounds in the red sand that were the mines. Perhaps there she'd find her answers.

Cole couldn't see what the others were doing. He didn't care.

They could be pulling the place to pieces, or helping themselves to the drinks. It didn't matter any more. This was it. The sound of the gunfire had been the soft pat-pat of the dirt hitting his coffin, sealing him for all eternity into hell. There was no escape.

Perhaps the little stranger had been a chance at salvation, but now he was dead and that chance had gone. Now all he had was a lifetime of guilt, trapped on a planet run by Wakeling and his children.

He didn't look as he heard footsteps on the staircase. He didn't want to see the leer of triumph on the dolphin's face, the glint in his eye.

Perhaps if he was lucky, Bernard would consider him a loose thread and end it for him.

'Hello,' came the Doctor's voice from above.

Cole nearly jumped clean over the bar, his heart making a desperate bid to escape the confines of his chest. He knocked the back of his head under the bar as he looked above him.

There was the Doctor, leaning over the bar and looking down at him, his expression unreadable. There was a twinkle in his grey eyes now, a spark that hadn't been there before. It lit his whole face, giving it warmth and light. Making it alive.

His dark jacket and garish pullover were distinctly lacking in bullet holes.

‘I thought I should tell you not to bother with that phone call just yet,’ he said, his voice even. ‘I’m going to go for a little walk.’

Cole was so surprised, he couldn’t speak. Instead, he just nodded, mute.

‘That is,’ the Doctor turned, addressing the others, invisible to Cole from where he was still sitting, ‘unless anybody else would care to try and kill me?’

Nobody spoke.

‘I’ll take that as a no,’ the Doctor said presently.

He spun around, out of Cole’s restricted view of the world, and a few seconds later Cole heard the saloon bar doors swing open and shut. He sat still a moment longer, suddenly unwilling to stand and face the others. What would he see when he did?

Would he see his co-conspirators, men as terrified as he was that the truth would come out? Or would he see a gang of criminals, scum, whose time was running out? More importantly, what would he see as he caught himself in the mirror? No, better to wait. ‘Are you just going to let him walk away?’ came Bernard’s modulated voice from the top of the stairs.

Cole didn’t move. He heard Sheriff’s glass strike the bar.

‘I reckon I am, yes,’ the lawman said, his voice showing traces of the drink now.

‘Stop him, Sheriff. Do something. Arrest him!’

Cole heard the stool scrape as Sheriff spun on it, or perhaps even leapt from it to confront the angry dolphin. Cole could imagine the lawman swaying a little as he pushed his red face through the metal of Bernard’s walker, hissing the words right into his beady little eyes.

‘On what charge, Bernard?’ he growled. ‘I ain’t locking someone up for taking a walk. I’m still the law around here.’

There was silence then, just the sound of Bernard’s walker hissing slightly as it covered the Cetacean with a fine spray.

‘How long do you think that will last if he goes nosing around the ‘Flats, Sheriff?’ the dolphin asked, its plummy voice sing-song light.

Cole wondered what the chances were of spending the rest of his life hiding behind the bar.

## Chapter Nine

6. August, 6048 CE

13:23

Sweetness was being a good little girl, despite the pain. She was standing still as a statue with her sleeve pulled up to her armpit while Daddy prodded and poked the flesh with his needle. The little machine that the needle poked out of beeped and flashed and showed Daddy all sorts of numbers that meant nothing to her, but seemed to make him pleased. The needle in her arm didn't really hurt that much; just a little sharpness at first, and a funny feeling whenever it moved. It moved quite a lot, as Daddy's hands were shaking, just a little.

Sweetness thought about saying something, but Daddy was wearing his work face so she thought better of it. He was staring over the top of his glasses at the flashing numbers, frowning intently. Sometimes he'd bring a finger to his thin lips or run a hand through his hair, but that was all. The last time he'd wiped his face, a little of Sweetness's blood had found its way to his cheek. She thought it was best not to tell him about that, either.

'Very good,' he muttered more to himself than her, 'very good.'

Daddy glanced out of the window then, and Sweetness gasped as the needle slipped in his hands. Daddy swore, but again Sweetness said nothing.

Instead, the little red-haired girl turned her attention to the window, to whatever had made Daddy swear. It could have been any number of things. The dust was getting whipped up by a particularly strong wind, sliding across the road until it slammed into doors and windows making little hills against the woodwork.

The wind was making little snakes in the thin dust, wriggling this way and that down the street. Perhaps that was what had made Daddy swear.

Perhaps it was the sight of the funny little man in the dark coat, with his torn umbrella flapping in the wind as he tried to keep the dust from his eyes. Perhaps it was the fact that the little man was walking away from the bar, out into the desert. Or perhaps it was the same



thing that made Sweetness herself bite her bottom lip – perhaps Daddy didn't like Bernard any more than she did, and the sight of him striding down the street with his two nasty friends kicking up the dust behind him filled Daddy with the same queasy feeling in his stomach.

Whatever it was that made Daddy swear, it was enough to make him finish his experiments for the morning, which had to be something.

He pulled the needle from her arm, the tip glistening red as the instrument started to whine. It was a mosquito, denied its food. It was a vampire, sucking the life out of her. It was just a little needle, and it was for her own good.

'Why don't you go and play upstairs, Sweetness?' Daddy said, not taking his eyes from the window.

For a moment, Sweetness considered being a stubborn little miss, and just hanging around despite Daddy's instructions; the way he was staring out of the window, that frown starting to pull down on his face, he probably wouldn't even notice. But she was a big girl now, big enough to think of the consequences. And she knew that disobeying Daddy now would have some pretty bad consequences; he had been grumbly ever since Sweetness had seen the little man that morning, and she guessed that Bernard was only going to make things worse. And there was also the fact that Bernard would soon be in the room, spreading his nicotine smell everywhere and looking down at her, all black eyes and sharp teeth. Sweetness was a good girl, and Sweetness did what her daddy told her.

Just as she reached the foot of the stairs, there was a knock on the door.

The big blackbird on its perch started a horrible cackling, perhaps thinking it was being helpful. Probably not. Sweetness turned to give it her best glare – she would show it she wasn't scared of a big dumb bird – but the creature just stared back, its glistening eyes the mirror of Bernard's, and just kept on cackling.

It sounded like demented laughter, and it even made Daddy annoyed enough to throw the needle-machine at it. The bird just fluttered a moment on its perch, and then settled down again, in silence. Nothing so astounding, but it delayed Sweetness long enough to let her see the door swing slowly open.

Standing in the doorway, looking nervous, was the big man with the grey bits in his hair. He towered over her – was a good head taller

than Daddy even, and he was a giant – with a great long coat flapping about his legs like the blackbird's dark wings.

His eyes were half buried under sprouting white eyebrows, but they still glistened in the light, burning with cleverness. He ran a lined hand up through his hair, pushing it away from his old man's face, and showed the world how worried he was.

'Lee, I'm afraid this isn't a good time,' Daddy said, making to push the man gently away from the doorway. Bernard was just outside the window now, skidding to a halt and kicking up a good cloud of dust as he did. The red rain trickled down through the sky.

'I know,' the old man said, his voice deeper than Sweetness could ever pretend to imitate. His face twitched as if what he said scared even him. 'But there's something you really ought to know. About the girl.'

Daddy's eyes turned straight to Sweetness then, still hovering at the foot of the stairs.

'The *stranger*,' the old man added, but Daddy was still staring at her.

'Sweetness, what did I say?' snarled Daddy, his face all a-sowl.

Sweetness was a good girl. She did what her Daddy told her.

Ace was a bundle of complaints, and there wasn't anyone around to hear them. Her feet were starting to blister as her Doc Martens had begun to slip and slide up the ankle. Her shoulders were sore and red as the sun slowly baked them. Her eyes were watering from the constant squinting, because of course she hadn't brought her sunglasses with her – the Doctor had been promising her a futuristic pair of shades with in-built vision enhancements, but so far nothing had been forthcoming. She was hot and bothered and tired, and it just wasn't fair that something had swallowed up the horses and made her walk all the way out to the mines. Even the glum and gloomy Doctor would be welcomed now, just so she could moan to somebody other than herself.

It wasn't even as if she could just kick back and enjoy the scenery either. The Adobe Flats were resolutely living up to their name at the moment. They rolled away before her, the only thing stopping her from seeing the end of them the curvature of the planet. She thought she could see the horizon – a line of fire where red sands became blue skies – but that could just be the after-image of the desert burnt onto her retina by the sun. She supposed some people might find the sheer

emptiness of the place awe-inspiring, beautiful even, but Ace could pretty much bet that after a couple of minutes' putting one foot in front of the other in shifting sand, they'd soon change their tune.

Ace was so desperate for something to break up the monotony of sand and sky, that she'd planned her whole route accordingly. A few miles back, she'd spotted the tree and instantly fell in love with it, another scraggly loner stuck out on the sands. It was a big sod, stuck incongruously out in the middle of nowhere, looking like a weeping willow whose tears had dried up. She hadn't seen any others around, and was beginning to doubt it was even native; just behind it – masked by its swaying branches – was some kind of structure, and a picket fence made of the same plastic-wood stuff as everything else ran right up to its roots. It was obviously something to do with the colonists, but that wasn't why she was heading that way; any company would be better than no company right now.

The sands shifted under her feet again, and almost sent her stumbling face down into the dust. For one heart-pounding second, Lee's warnings about cave-ins came echoing back into her mind, but then she had regained her balance and was steady again. Good; she didn't care what else happened to her, but Ace resolutely refused to twist her ankle. She was only half worried by Lee's warnings anyway; the old guy was obviously petrified of something out on the desert, and didn't want anyone else running into it. Yeah, that was why he'd tried to scare her with cave-ins, Ace was sure. Well, mostly sure.

Ace stopped. Stopped walking, stopped complaining, stopped everything.

She'd reached the tree.

It stood in front of her, feet slipping deep into the dust whilst its arms stretched out to touch the sun. Its roots, its trunk, were old and gnarled, knots and lumps running up and down it like veins, the red dust nestling within. The trunk was a deep blue colour – almost black – but aside from that there was nothing to distinguish it from any other trees that Ace had ever seen before in her life. Nothing to say this was an alien tree on an alien planet that by sheer power of mathematics was one of an infinity that humans could breathe, drink, live on. No, the thing that made the tree striking was what it had tried to hide from Ace.

Where the picket fence ran into the trunk of the tree, the pale plastic-wood merged seamlessly into the living flesh. Just below that,

positioned carefully in the shade of the spreading branches, somebody had made a cross by securing two planks together, and planted them firmly into the ground. The red dust welled up around the crude gravestone as if the earth itself was bleeding. As if that wasn't bad enough, behind the tree the fence rolled around until it caught in the side of the structure Ace had seen. From a distance, it had been hazy, but now it resolved itself until Ace saw it for what it was; the burnt-out shell of somebody's home.

Somewhere, a breeze picked up, and the sand rolled in silence over the desert. It was the only movement for miles around, everything else dead and decaying.

Arabella sat on her perch, her wings flat against her side, giving her the appearance of being hunched in a continual shrug. It suited her mood, and she waddled up and down her perch waiting for somebody to notice her annoyance. As usual, no one did; no one paid her any attention since the little one arrived in the house. Of course, Arabella was only a raven and so couldn't be expected to understand anything about jealousy, but she did know that somebody else was stealing her attention and that didn't feel right. So she flapped and cawed whenever she could, and took delight in scaring the little one whenever she could, but still the big father ignored her.

It was indeed a terrible burden to bear, for such a devoted raven.

Ed appeared in Arabella's line of sight, his lank hair sticking to his neck and a dry finger poking absent-mindedly towards the bird's beak. He would never know how tempted she was – black as her mood was – to reach out and snap it off. She didn't, though; she was merely carrion, and she recognised the cold stare of a predator when she felt it on her.

'Ed, leave the bird alone,' Christa sighed, and he looked sulkily after her, his eyes hooded to keep his thoughts to himself.

He didn't say a word as the two of them disappeared past the raven out to the back of the house. Arabella didn't mind; it was only the big father's attention she craved. The attention of predators was something evolution had taught her to avoid.

Lee was still standing in the doorway, blocking Arabella's view of the dusty world outside. Aside from him, the house was empty; Bernard's panicked chitterings overlaid with their calm translation had drawn Wakeling out into the street, where he had listened with remarkable

patience. The only sign of his discomfort, his anger, was a thin line of tension running from the arm of his glasses down to his chin as his jaw started to compress. Had Arabella seen it, she would have recognised it; she had seen it many times before some object or other had flown across the room to strike her perch soundly.

‘I told you we should have done this from the start,’ the dolphin’s cool voice said, as Ed and Christa appeared on horseback from the side of Wakeling’s shack.

‘Just do as you’re told, Bernard,’ Wakeling snarled, before turning back to Lee. The miner suddenly found he couldn’t meet the professor’s eyes. ‘Thank you for your information. You’ve done the right thing.’

Even Arabella could have seen that Lee wasn’t convinced.

‘And thanks for the horses,’ Ed called over before spurring his animal viciously in the sides, sending him galloping away towards the ‘Flats. With a gasp of hydraulics, Bernard lurched after him at speed, Christa bringing up the rear on Lee’s other horse.

‘Next time we’ll let you know we borrowed them,’ she promised sincerely. ‘Perhaps.’

Wakeling turned and hurried back into his home then, but wisely Arabella decided not to make any demands on his attention. Instead, she turned her black beak on herself, preening and picking at her thick feathers.

As the dust worked out of them, it rained on the ground like dripping blood.

Ace had stood outside the house for what seemed like an age, staring up at it. It looked different to the others she had seen, different in a way that was more than just they were alive and this was dead. It was made from the same pale planks as the other buildings, but this design was different. It had been planned by someone, not just erected to conform to the factory layout. It had been personalised, loved. It had been somebody’s home.

Now it was a corpse, rotting in the desert, bones bleached by the sun. The walls, hadn’t burnt as such – which confirmed to Ace that there was something more than wood about them – but the ash of the fire had stained them black, and here and there the planks themselves had melted and buckled. It made the house look as if it had finally grown

tired of the constant glare of the sun, and was slowly sinking into the red sand to escape it.

In the yard, there had been a well. It had long since dried up, the sand and dust filling it until it was barely more than a circle of stones and a bucket on a rope. The house had been dead a while, then. And most likely the Heyworths with it.

There was no doubt in Ace's mind that this house had belonged to the Heyworths, the people the Doctor had dragged her to this dustbowl to meet. They'd lived out on the Adobe Flats, and this burnt-out shell was smack in the middle of them.

They'd disappeared, and here was this corpse marking their last resting place. Perhaps they had moved away, but then that still left the grave underneath the tree. Something had died here, that much was certain. And Lee, Cole, Bernard, all of them hadn't wanted her or the Doctor to find out.

As Ace had crept through the front door, she'd felt that old familiar feeling. Her hackles rose, dragging the hairs all over her body up with them. She resisted the urge to hiss, but the tension needed some release. When she was younger, she would have earthed the electricity in the air with explosives, tearing the whole atmosphere apart. She was older now, and had long ago realised the only way to lay spirits to rest was to understand what had happened to them, to answer their questions and unlock their mystery.

She hadn't dared touch the walls; mostly they were soot-covered and black, but here and there wallpaper still clung to them. Somehow, that made her shiver where the darkness didn't.

She was moving through the house now, stepping more cautiously than she had out on the desert sands, as if in this house she truly believed that the earth might open up and suck her in, swallowing her into its fiery belly. The house was silent, sullen to her intrusion, and the tension still crackled around her.

She was a child weaned on Freddy Krueger and Norman Bates –

she knew what houses of terror should look like. They should be dark and grainy, each corner impossible to see until the madman has his knife in your chest. This house refused to conform; the sun streamed in through the gaps in walls, ceilings, and the heat was a stifling echo of the flames that had consumed it. Every detail was clear to her, and that only served to make the sights more gruesome.

Ace would never have told a soul, but she was scared.

Creeping down the hallway, towards what she assumed would be the kitchen, every step brought a new discovery. The stairs had burnt to ash and dust, leaving no way up to the top floor. They must have been made of wood, or something that burnt better than the strange material of the walls. The carpet had burnt into patches, but as she continued along it, it became darker and darker until she was treading on a fine layer of ash.

Oddly, she half hoped there would be somewhere to wipe her feet before she reached the kitchen; she didn't want to tread all this dirt into somebody's home.

The closer she got to the kitchen, the more the walls warped and bent, the blacker the world became. Whatever had started it, the fire had begun life in the kitchen, growing and growing until its furnace heart was centred around the room, its burning limbs stretching out to stain the rest of the rooms. Somehow, that was a relief; when she'd entered the house, she'd automatically looked for the signs of the fire making its way down from the letterbox, and in. As she walked, she was drawn to the kitchen.

She didn't even want to think about what she might find there; the smell of burning flesh, the sight of it, was tripping across her memory in flashes.

To her left, something creaked. Suddenly, Ace remembered the building fires of her youth, how the flames could lick and eat the rigour from even the sturdiest brick. She didn't know what the house was made from, but if it melted and buckled like plastic in the heat of the fire, then it couldn't be any stronger than anything else. If the building collapsed while she was in it, then that would put a definite full-stop to the questions that needed asking.

A sound again, not a creak this time.

It was a definite sharp sound, something tapping against the floor.

Looking back, Ace saw a buckled door just behind her. It led off to her left, into what she presumed was a living room. The sound came again, more muted this time. Whatever it was, it wasn't the sound of the house straining around her. It was the sound of something moving in there. The sound of some *one* poking around, perhaps trying to find a decent hiding place from which to surprise the nosy stranger, to silence her before she managed to shout too loudly, draw too much

attention where none was desired.

Ace crept back down the corridor, her heart pounding in her neck. She swallowed, trying to push it away, concentrate on what she was doing, but it wouldn't shift. She could hear every step she took echo in her ears along with the pounding, screaming out her location to the occupant of the room. Still she crept forwards, finally pressing her ear up against the door. It was cold, slimy, but she wouldn't flinch. She was listening; the room was silent now. There was only one thing for it, one approach to take.

One, two, *three!*

Ace took a single step back, and a heavy Doc Marten slammed into the door, sending it falling away from its hinges and into the room.

Graceful as a cat, Ace pounced.

## Chapter Ten

6. August, 6048 CE

14:06

*'As you walk in your footprints, be sure not to tread on your shadow.'*

Tharil proverb.

For the eternity of a moment, time became nothing.

Ace stood with her ear against a door, a warped and melted thing only a few inches taller than she was, made of a pale wood that looked and acted more like plastic. Her face was creased as she strained to hear something – anything – over the drumming of her own pulse. Her teeth gnawed at her lip, a sign that her efforts were fruitless. There was no sound to be heard, not any more. The house was dead now – hadn't always been, was once alive with a love that prickled at the base of her spine, made her trigger finger itch. But now it was dead. Just her. And the other somebody, behind that melted door.

Suddenly, time was elastic and snapped back.

Ace's foot kicked out; the door burst from its hinges.

The only sound was the echo of the door as it landed on ash-covered floorboards.



‘Don’t do that again,’ came a voice out of the ashes. ‘This house isn’t particularly stable, even the slightest noise could bring it down.’

Ace’s heart burst, spreading fire all the way down her body as adrenaline flared and soured in the space of a breath.

‘Professor!’ she hissed, half relief, half anger.

‘You’d better come in,’ the Doctor said, but didn’t look her way. Ace looked about, and cautiously crept further into the room. It was heart-breaking; the furniture looked like it had originally been provided by Lee, but now it was splinters, ash, or else melted into Dali-esque illusions by heat too great to imagine.

There were the remains of a dining table, four chairs, and a few pieces of what had once been computer equipment, but was now just cinders. The room had obviously once been the heart of the home, the cosy snug the family could retreat to after a day trying to raise Eden out of the desert. Now, it was a shell, a husk, and nothing more.

Filling almost the entire length of the far wall was an ornately designed fireplace that Ace would have classed as Edwardian if she hadn’t been certain that Lee’s repertoire didn’t stretch back that far. It too was made from the pale plastic-wood, but seemed to have survived the fire reasonably well; a quick wipe down, and it might look as good as new. There were even still some photographs in frames resting on the mantelpiece, smudged but intact. More than could be said for the mirror behind them, which had cracked and shattered under the stresses of the heat.

The Doctor was standing with his back to her, staring into the hearth. Ace was quite pleased the mirror was broken. It meant she couldn’t see the look in his eyes. She’d seen that look once too often, and even now still felt a little scared of him whenever it returned. It was the look that said he was the Doctor no longer, just an avenging function of history itself. The look that said nothing else mattered but setting things right, regardless of the casualties.

Ace shivered. Now the Doctor was here, she’d given up any hope of finding survivors.

‘How old would you say I am, Ace?’ the Doctor asked, his voice low, the Scots burr turning it almost into a growl. ‘How many civilisations would you say I’d seen rise out of the dust, only to fall back into it? How many millions would you say I’d seen die?’

Ace said nothing. If she'd been able to see his eyes at that moment, she knew that she would have had no doubt; she would have believed the Doctor had stood on the last day of the universe and met with each soul as they went on to meet their maker. Meeting their eyes, shaking his head, and ticking each name off against a list of those he couldn't save. Doffing his hat grimly as they passed on, leaving him alone with the end of everything.

Ace was very pleased that she couldn't see his eyes.

'They're dead, aren't they,' Ace said flatly. She already knew the answer. 'The Heyworths.'

The Doctor didn't look back, didn't answer immediately, just looked down into the ashes in the grate. Perhaps that was the only fire he dared let himself see.

'That's why you didn't want to come out here, isn't it?' Ace pushed, still hoping for an explanation she could accept.

The silhouette by the fire shook its head sadly.

'I didn't want to find out. I didn't want to know that they'd joined all those millions. That they were dead.' A pause then, perhaps shaken himself by the finality of words. 'As long as I didn't come here, as long as I didn't *know*, then they could still be alive.'

Ace took a step closer. She was close enough to see every thread in the Doctor's coat now, stretched tight as his shoulders drooped. She wanted to touch him, put an arm around him and let him cry on her. But he was the Doctor; the Doctor didn't do things like that with you, and you didn't do them with him.

'Who were they?' she asked softly, half afraid of the answer.

The Doctor motioned to the photographs with a flick of his umbrella. Timidly, Ace reached up and plucked one down. The ash smudged her fingers immediately, leaving the negative of four fingerprints clear on the glass. She wiped the ash away with a sleeve, revealing a singed photograph beneath; a smiling couple, both with greying, ginger hair standing in front of the farmhouse. Before the fire, happy with each other, happy with life. How long before they would lose it all, Mr Heyworth and his beloved wife?

'You've met her before,' the Doctor said softly.

Ace looked again at the woman.

Red hair streaked with grey – which was what had made her not recognise her at first; she'd been younger when Ace had met her. But the eyes were the same – sparkling and intelligent, radiating a personality that felt sure it could cope with anything if it faced it enthusiastically enough. The eyes and the smile, bright and warm and so infectiously cheerful that you couldn't help but smile back at her.

Ace dropped the photo. It landed in the carpet of dust, went through it and sent it exploding into the air. The black dust slowly rained back down, doing its best to obscure the two smiling faces. Trying, but failing.

Ace looked at the Doctor, and at last he'd turned to look at her. She looked into his eyes. There was no avenging force there, just a scared old man who had come seeking rest and respite, and found only death, upon death, upon death.

And still the photograph stared up at her, accusingly.

Mr Heyworth, and his beloved wife, Melanie Bush.

## Chapter Eleven

6. August, 6048 CE

14:09

'No,' said Ace. For a while, it was all she said; it seemed so succinct. 'No.'

Looking down at the ash-strewn floor, the photograph looked back up at her; smiling eyes and flame-red hair, the both of them.

'No,' she repeated. 'This isn't true. It's a fake. It's a trap.'

Somebody's trying to trick you, get you upset so you make a mistake.'

The Doctor had turned back to the fire. He was staring into the hearth as if he could read the secrets of the universe in the ash that had gathered there. Perhaps he was just trying to work out if the ash was from the fire, or just the remains of a last family night at the hearth before disaster put them to an end.

Perhaps this didn't even affect him; what was he anyway? More than human; did that make Mel less than him in his eyes? Or her? 'Is that

what you think?’ the Doctor asked the fire grimly.

For a moment, she thought he’d read her mind.

Ace looked about her; the fire, the darkness, the ash. The too familiar stench was in her nose, settling in her mind. It pushed its way through her senses, barging past her defences until it had claimed pride of place in the corner where she tried to hide those memories too painful to forget. It was more than the smell of the place, more than the look, more than the memory of the makeshift grave beneath the blue willow; it was the feeling the whole house gave her, an electric emptiness in the pit of her stomach. Something bad had happened here, she knew. Something fatal.

But she couldn’t be dead. It wasn’t possible.

But why?

‘You don’t know for sure,’ Ace said, but it sounded weak, even to her. The Doctor didn’t even answer her.

Memories, triggered by the scent. Scents seemed as good as pictures to her, sometimes. Pictures of Mel’s chirpy grin, bouncing around the planet trying to infect everybody with the enthusiasm of a breakfast television fitness instructor. She’d only met her briefly, and hadn’t really got to know her then. She hadn’t asked about her since – she was the ex, the previous, the one he would always compare you to – but sometimes she found traces of her around the TARDIS. She knew Mel had left, knew there had been others before, and that one day there would be others after. But only when she decided. That was what happened; you made a decision and you stepped out of the Doctor’s life. You remembered, but you didn’t miss it. You were happy.

Ace knew that one day in the future that was the fate that awaited her. *That* fate, not this. Not this charred echo of a life.

This wasn’t what happened when you left. It couldn’t be.

‘She’s not dead, Professor,’ Ace said, words like a hammer striking iron. ‘She can’t be.’

‘They’re all dead,’ the Doctor replied, the fingers on his umbrella whitening as his grip tightened. ‘From here – from this time – there’s only a handful of them left. From another perspective, they’ve been dead thousands of years. But from another, they’re still waiting to be

born. It's all a matter of how you look at it.'

'Stop it!' Ace shouted, surprising herself with the fury in her voice. 'Stop that! Don't talk about this as if it's just something for you to philosophise about.'

The Doctor turned again, just his head flicking round to glare at her over his shoulder. The light struck his eyes, leaving his face in shadow. From where she stood, she could see his eyes were red-rimmed and sore. Even Time Lords get the blues.

'What else do you want me to do?' he asked, his voice cracking.

Ace wished she knew.

'There must be something,' she pleaded, disgusted at the childish tinge to her voice. I'm a big girl now, I am, I am, I *am*!

The Doctor tilted his head back, not speaking. His hat threw his whole face into shadow, just a dark tear in the universe wearing a stupid jumper and two-tone spats.

'It's possible,' he started, slowly. 'I've thought about it, and there is a way. If we leave now.'

He looked at her, twisting his whole body until his sad grey eyes were locked onto hers. He leant forward, all his weight on his tattered umbrella, his voice low and hypnotic. Ace felt the air crackle between them, the sparks threatening to set the house ablaze again.

'I've thought about it a lot, Ace,' he said, his eyes twinkling as if they were trying to let her in on something. 'I could do something. I could twist this, and fold it, and sew a neat little tuck in the timelines. We're unique, do you understand? Our perceptions shape history; if we don't see the contradictions, then they don't exist. But if we stay, if we stay...'

The Doctor caught himself, and brought his umbrella to his lips, as if to kiss it. His voice sounded calm when he continued, but his eyes still blazed like a furnace. They were questioning, imploring. Begging.

'If we stay, if we hope that despite all this there's more than we see, and we find out that we're wrong...' the Doctor let his words hang before he continued. They froze in the air like mist.

'If we find out for sure, if we *know*! I can't change what I know to

have happened. If I see you die, Ace. If I hold your body in my arms...'

Again, the silence roared and swallowed up his words. The darkness joined it, hungry, and swallowed up the Doctor's eyes.

The shadows left Ace alone, totally.

She took a breath, and knew what she had to say.

'If it was me,' she began, and paused. Her deep brown eyes flicked around the ruin of the room. 'If this was my home, I'd know that you cared about me enough to find out what happened. I'd know that you'd do whatever you could to find whoever did this to me, and make sure that they didn't get away with it.'

The Doctor didn't speak. Perhaps he knew it was the right thing to say too. Perhaps that was why Ace shouldn't be too worried that she'd lied.

She knew what she had to say. She knew what the right answer was. But as she looked around the charred room, as she thought about the terror the fire must have inspired, what it would feel like for those last few minutes to know that your every retreat was blocked. She shivered; old thoughts coming back to haunt her. If she'd told the truth, she would've told the Doctor that – if it was her – she'd only be thinking one thing as the fire started to crackle the hairs on her arms; the Doctor will save me. Who knew – perhaps that was what Mel had thought, too. But looking at the Doctor, Ace knew she'd done the right thing. There had been a look in his eyes as she spoke, a spark igniting a flame. Within seconds, her words had thawed the chill in him, and he was there again; her Doctor.

She had no doubts at all that she had said what the Doctor needed to hear.

But still he turned away from her, devoured again by the starving shadows.

The air shimmered as the wind caught the dust and set it dancing, whipping across the deserts with nothing to stop it but the three figures. Ed and Christa had already pulled out silk handkerchiefs from their pockets and wrapped them over their mouths and noses to keep the dust out, but it still stung their eyes as they tried to keep the tree in sight. The wind had wiped out all traces of the strangers' journey across the 'Flats, but they didn't need a tracker, they already knew where they were headed.

There was only one place they could be headed, out here. An early grave.

Bernard should've been suffering the worst – the desert drylands were the last place you'd expect to see one of his kind –

but he was still leading the charge, his pointed little snout sniffing out the farmhouse through the dust. Some of the pores on his walker had become clogged by the dust storm, stopped their constant circulation of water over his grey skin. It didn't matter, there were others that would keep him alive until he could get some repairs done. He had the advantage out here; the dust and the loose sand made Ed and Christa's horses skittish and wary; his walker would carry him across the desert without slowing, without tiring, until his prey was caught.

'Spread out,' Bernard's voice boomed out, amplified to counter the wind but retaining its clipped delivery. 'If one of you opens up a mine, I don't want you dragging me down with you.'

'You're all heart,' Christa replied through a face full of silk, but the wind whipped her words away so not even Ed heard them.

The shaven-headed man in the leather coat instead scanned the horizon, his eyes squinting against sun and sand. His horse whinnied slightly as it galloped, worried by the way its hooves slipped and sank into the thin red dust. Horses weren't really suited for Heritage – they preferred to keep their feet on solid ground – but needs must; they were more suited than transports and skitters, and easier to replace when they broke down. If they whined, if they snorted, if the foam specked their mouths and their eyes widened, then that was a sign to kick your heels in that bit deeper.

'There!' Ed shouted. No one heard the words, but they both saw him pointing.

Behind the bulk of the tree, the farmhouse stood. Its door was wide open, flapping about in the wind with a ferocity that threatened to bring the whole ruined facade down. The strangers had obviously thought the same, because the trio could just make them out, scuttling away from the farmhouse and trying to become invisible in the dust.

'Come on!' Christa yelled at her horse, digging her heels so deep into its sides that she must have felt them click together.

The three of them raced after the figures, the smell of the hunt in the air.

‘This way, Doctor,’ yelled Ace, and got a face full of dust for her troubles.

The storm had crept up from nowhere, throwing itself hard against the house while they’d been inside cautiously picking through the remains. They’d only realised once the latch on the front door gave way, and the banging of the door set the whole building shaking. It had been the Doctor who found the quickest way out of the building, pushing her through the warped and distorted front window, out into a swirling world of red.

The dust had been so thick in the air that they almost hadn’t seen their pursuers.

Almost.

‘No, Ace – this way!’ came the Doctor’s bellowing voice, and he wrapped an arm around her and pulled her away to the left.

She could feel the handle of his umbrella digging into her ribs.

He pulled her back towards the tree with the black-blue hide, past the drystone wall which was beginning to crumble under the onslaught of the sand; tiny grains destroying heavy stones, a triumph for the underdog. The dry branches of the tree were whipping around like flails, catching Ace’s cheeks and setting them stinging all over again, as if the dust wasn’t doing a good enough job. The Doctor didn’t seem to notice, his only concession being to steady his panama on his head as the tree tried its best to dislodge it.

‘The horses won’t want to get too close to the branches,’ he explained, shouting into Ace’s ear. ‘They’ll already be nervous in this storm.’

‘They’re not all on horses,’ Ace countered, but the Doctor didn’t seem to hear her.

‘If you wait here,’ he said, his eyes squinting towards the three figures galloping their way, ‘the storm will probably die down in a few minutes, they rarely last long. Just let the wind blow itself out.’

But Ace wasn’t falling for that one, either.

‘What about you?’ she yelled in his ear. His eardrums would be stinging, but at least he couldn’t pretend to ignore her.

The Doctor gave her that annoying grin of his, doffed his hat, and



dived out into the worst of the storm. Bearing down on the horsemen.

‘You sneaky bastard!’ she yelled after him, but the wind ate her voice.

‘There!’ came Bernard’s voice again, and the dolphin was nothing but a flash of steel into the red mists.

He had spotted the Doctor easily; if the idea of his outfit was to blend easily into the crowd, then it had failed miserably. As much as the dust and the sand eddied and swam in front of his dry black eyes, Bernard could still see the little man in the dark coat and chequered trousers as he bolted away from the tree, blindly aiming for safety.

‘Find the other one,’ he ordered, safe in the knowledge that his underlings would hear him. They’d better; he had the output on his speakers cranked up to maximum, and the vibrations when he spoke were making him feel dizzy.

The Doctor made a quick-footed twist as Bernard drew near, pulling out of the way faster than the walker could compensate.

Bernard cackled violently – not even hearing his onboard computer translate – and snapped his jaws at the Doctor’s flapping coat. His prey swam away from him, shimmering in the sea of dust, switching in the blink of an eye, left then right. It made Bernard think of those shoals of fish that parted before the camera on the documentaries he’d seen. That made him angrier still, and he almost overturned his walker in his effort to spin it back around, before the Doctor could escape.

The sand slipped between his metal toes, and the Doctor slipped out of his grasp.

And still the wind howled the dust through the air.

Ace watched, clinging to what shelter the tree could provide.

Part of her longed to be out there, in the sailing dust. Riding high on horseback and running down her prey until it was nothing but blood leaking into sand. It brought all sorts of strange sensations whirling through her blood, and set an acid taste in her mouth. She fought it down with a snarl, and tried to keep her mind and her eyes trained on the Doctor.

It was hard to make anything out; the storm was reaching its height, the sand crashing about the desert like waves on the sea.

Flotsam and jetsam tumbled across her line of sight, head over heels like eager circus performers. The thin, dry tree branches whipped and whirled around her, forcing her to hold tight to the trunk in case she lost an eye. The world was nothing but a red cloud, and vague dark shapes danced within.

No, wait, there!

She managed to pick out the racing shape of the Doctor, one hand clasped firmly onto his closed umbrella. She had a mad idea that if he opened it, escape would be his and he'd float away into the sky like Mary Poppins at a happy ending. He didn't need anything like that, though; his pursuer was Bernard, and the dolphin's lumbering metal cradle was no match for the Doctor's lithe dancing feet. As she watched, Ace saw Bernard almost tumble into the dust as the Doctor slid under the metal feet and up and away on the other side. It was all she could do to keep from cheering; she could practically feel the Doctor itching to take a bow.

Ace's elation turned sour and died.

As the Doctor turned, he found himself face to face with a long brown face. The horse snorted once, spittle flecking the Doctor's face; obviously it was just as unnerved as he was to suddenly find him there. A mirror to each other – faces long and surprised – both the Doctor and the horse reared away from each other, pulling back even as Ed urged the horse forwards.

The Doctor scrambled to regain his footing, feet frantically kicking up more sand into a sky already choking with it. Perhaps he would've made it, too. Perhaps.

Ace saw it before the Doctor.

The earth began to slide.

It opened, sand sliding down into the dark maw.

The look on the Doctor's face burned itself on Ace's heart, open-mouthed, surprised as the red ground began to chew on his dancing feet. The earth gave way under the combined weight of him and the horse, whatever supports there had been in the mine below crumbling to dust. In a second, his legs were gone as he slipped beneath the surface like a man drowning; it was only the horse's natural nervousness that saved it from sharing his fate, already pulling away before the weak ground even began to crumble. The Doctor threw his

hands out into the air, but there was nothing but sand to grasp, and the wind seemed determined to blow it into his face.

Bernard and Ed merely stood, both showing their teeth, but for different reasons.

Ace stepped forwards, gasping in air to shout out to the Doctor. All she gained was a lungful of burning red dust that she coughed and spluttered out. Even as she tried to run to the Doctor, she felt something strike her, clean between the shoulder blades; something solid and heavy that sent her diving down into the dust herself. It rubbed itself into her hair, her eyes, her skin, trying to make her one with it, trying to digest her as it had digested the Doctor.

Pulling her head up, Ace was just in time to see the Doctor's hand slide beneath the parting sands for the last time. The earth had eaten him, and would perhaps never spit the bones out.

She rolled onto her back, looking for her assailant.

Christa stared nonchalantly down at her, picking at her nails with a knife twice the size of herself. She smiled a little girl's smile, all lips and no teeth, her eyes round and innocent.

'Oh *please* do,' she urged, flicking the knife so that it spun in her grip until the handle rested perfectly in her palm.

Ace decided not to. Yet.

## Chapter Twelve

6. August, 6048 CE

14:18

Lee sat in his house, not saying a word, not hearing the storm as it gradually blew itself out and let the dust settle over everything once again. He didn't hear the creaking of the beams, the rattling of the shutters on their hinges, even the groans of his own chair as he leant forwards in it. He didn't see the pictures that were crowding in all around him, looking down at him with disapproval in their eyes, despite their smiles. He didn't speak, hear, or see; it was how he had learnt to survive on Heritage, these last few years.

'Oh dear,' Ryan would have said, had he been there.

Except, of course, that he was there. He was all around him, frozen in time and staring down glassily at him with a benign smile. Lee had never been without him, couldn't bear to be without him, and so he kept him close, all around. Close enough to touch, but still nowhere near. He smiled out of the past, but Lee knew it was a place he could never reach, only watch. He couldn't change it, couldn't make a single difference to make the world about him *today* a better place to live. No, he lived where he lived, today, now, alone. No wonder he tried to deny it whenever he could.

Lee pulled himself up out of his chair; it creaked and groaned as if willing to succumb to gravity and just collapse into dust.

He took a step forward, still looking at the photo on the wall in front of him. It was Ryan, a young man – a perpetual young man – standing in front of the main pit, blond hair half covering his blue eyes. He was laughing, frozen. The past was a happy place, but it was rigid and strict. You did what you did, what you had done, and you would do for evermore. There was no changing, just fantasies of what you would have, should have, could have. But they were only fantasy. The past was *not* for changing.

Laughing blue eyes stared down at him, and Ryan spoke then. Or was it just an echo of something deep in Lee?

Tears came easily, in that silent house.

Sweetness sat locked in her room, staring silently down at a teddy bear that was missing one eye. It had used to be a pale blue, but too many years exposed to Heritage's dusty world had left it a faded pastel pink. When she found herself in her room, sitting cross-legged on the bed and trying to think what it would be like to go somewhere new and have adventures, she often found herself looking down at that bear. There seemed to be some story to his missing eye, some great secret that he would share, if only she would spend her quiet hours with him. And she had, but so far the bear had remained as silent as she.

Outside her window, the blustering and the raging had long since stopped. The dust that had choked the sky suddenly stopped, as if tired, and fell to the ground like gentle rain.

Sweetness liked the storms. She liked their unpredictability. The way they would sweep in and dictate just what the adults had to do, for once. Heritage was such a silent town. It was good for her to rage and

scream, once in a while. Perhaps one day, Sweetness would, too. But not today. Today she was a good girl, and she had been told to stay in her room and so stay in her room she did.

If she cared to listen, Sweetness could hear the storm downstairs, the blustering and the raging that had moved inside once Bernard and his gang had come back. There was a low rumble – that was Daddy – that broke out only intermittently.

Mostly it was the clear and too loud voice of Bernard, and every word he spoke came pushing its way into Sweetness's room whether she wanted to listen or not. But she didn't want to listen; she was a good girl at the moment, and she was being quiet and playing quiet. The little pink bear seemed to be winking at her, with its one good eye.

'You just wait!' an angry shout floated enticingly, just a few steps away. The other stranger, the one Bernard's friend had carried in on the back of his horse.

Sweetness didn't listen, especially to the ruder words.

'Bernard!' her Daddy's voice snapped, finally raising itself into audibility. 'Take her out the back, for the love of God.'

'And?' Bernard's crystal voice filled the air.

But Sweetness didn't hear the reply. She was a good girl, and her teddy bear needed her.

There was darkness. Darkness and a trickle of dust. Nothing more.

The darkness grew more solid, and he slipped away.

Then a snap, and his eyes flipped open. He was looking up at the darkness; carelessly carved, moist darkness held in place by pale wooden props. No, not wood – plasticrete. The colonists had really made the best of their limited resources, although he wondered why the material didn't have more of a reddish tint to it, given the colour of the main ingredient. Perhaps they'd performed some technological jiggery-pokery to give it a more natural hue, although what could be more natural than its given colour he didn't know.

Hmm: rambling. Something bad happened then.

And something was wrong, but second things second.

Darkness. Darkness and sand. He patted his clothes experimentally, and was only mildly shocked to find that they came away red. Dry red – dust, not blood, so that was something. The pressure of the sand as he fell must have kept him safe, wrapped in a sliding cocoon until he hit the mine floor.

Hmm, hang on a second; pressure of sand as he fell, hit the mine floor. Ah! Well, that had cleared that one up. All he had to do now was work out what was wrong.

The Doctor sighed a satisfied sigh, lying on his back and watching the dark tunnel roof slowly inch past him. The pressure on his arms was bearable, of course, but it was slightly uncomfortable to have them pulled over his head in such a fashion.

Hang on a minute!

The Doctor struggled to turn his head, but only managed to drag his temple into the path of a particularly stubborn pebble.

The glancing blow stung a little, but he'd just escaped certain death in a cave-in so he supposed it would take more than that to trouble him. He couldn't quite position himself so that he could see what had hold of his arms, though. Perhaps Ace had been right after all; perhaps there was something large and hungry living in the mines, and it was slowly pulling him back to its lair for lunch.

An image came into the Doctor's mind; a dark ash-covered photograph, happy smiles masked by a growing shadow.

Whatever had caused that had been no mindless beast, seeking its next meal.

The Doctor jerked his head around wildly, but still couldn't see behind him. What he did manage to see, however, was below him. Just behind his two-tone spats, bringing up the rear, he could see his battered panama hat racing after him. In the gloom behind that, he could just catch a glimpse of a shiny red handle as it spun and twisted out of the way of the rocks. In both cases, two lights glowed just below the hat and the umbrella; a diffuse glow blurring into the darkness. And, of course, now that he concentrated, he could hear the vague humming all around him.

The Fussies.

The Doctor tried to twist in their grip, looking over his shoulders to

try and catch a glimpse of them, but they were too low to the ground. What he did see, however, was far more interesting. They weren't just dragging him mindlessly down into the mines, pulling him away from the hole he had made and the people who had forced him into it. They were taking him somewhere.

Just a small way down the tunnel, approaching slowly, was a city.

It was small, admittedly; the houses and the streets were only Fussy size, and so someone of even the Doctor's diminutive stature would have towered over them, a Gulliver in a strange new land. But it was definitely a city, laid out with a main street with rows of houses either side. It didn't take the Doctor a moment to recognise it; it was almost identical to the town above, only here the streets were dark and slick, not dead and dry like those of Heritage. What did take him longer was working out what the city was made from. It wasn't until the glimmering houses started to pass him by that he realised.

The Fussies had taken their cue from the colonists, and used whatever they could find to build their homes. But where the colonists had pulled wood and plastic out of the dust, the Fussies had raised their city out of the bones of the town. The houses were welded together, a mish-mash of a thousand different things taken from the colonists above; a few scraps of plasticrete, a doctor's instruments, a carpenter's tools, metal plates, plastic, glass and tin. Everything was material for the Fussies, everything was waiting to be cleaned away and reused.

Whether or not the original owner had ceased to have a use for it. 'Wombling underground,' the Doctor muttered, but the Fussies paid him no attention.

It occurred to the Doctor that the little creatures might just have designs on his constituent parts. Perhaps they had an extension planned, or a swimming pool. Not a very nice way to spend eternity; holding up somebody's greenhouse whilst your kidneys made an interesting water feature. Somehow the Doctor couldn't bring himself to believe it, though; the creatures seemed harmless enough. And friendly – they had been all over him since he'd set foot in Cole's bar, affectionately batting him like kittens. Or perhaps just measuring him up.

'I think perhaps I'd better go,' the Doctor said. 'Ace will be worried about me.'

But the Fussies didn't stop pulling.

‘Ahem,’ said the Doctor, more forcibly.

He tried to pull his sleeves out of their mouths, but their vacuum grip held strong. His hearts began to beat a little faster.

Ba-dum, ba-dum.

‘You could at least tell me where we’re going,’ he muttered petulantly.

One of the Fussies above his head gave a little squawk, its rubber underbelly catching sharply against the slick floor. The Doctor looked up at it automatically, and for a moment its dull glowing eyes met with his. It felt like staring into the eyes of a dear pet, when you just knew it was trying to tell you something.

Then it moved aside, and the Doctor caught sight of his destination; up ahead, the Fussies had constructed a quite sizeable bed out of metal posts and what looked like sections of a Class G colony ship, with a mattress of torn cloth leaking fine red sand. Despite everything, it actually appeared quite comfortable.

The Doctor tried to remember when he had last slept. The closest he could get was being knocked unconscious sometime last month.

Whilst he was thinking, a yawn took the opportunity to grasp freedom.

‘Alright then,’ he grumbled reluctantly. ‘But only for a little while.’

He was practically asleep before he was within two metres of the bed.

The Fussies hummed, hypnotically.

## Chapter Thirteen

6. August, 6048 CE

14:29

*‘The main problem in science now is purely philosophical; now we have robots shuffling around with brains based on ours, behaviour based on ours, lives based around ours, how do we draw the distinctions between us? How do we know which of us are truly alive? Some very sentient beings fail to live up to Asbury’s strict definitions, whilst most calculators could make a case under Horton’s rather more loose system. Personally, my own preferred system is a little less scientific; if it looks like a duck...’*



Professor Philip Yarrow,

Head of Technical Sciences,

Manchester University (2034-2056)

Ace was feeling quite confident, all things considered. So she'd been dragged out the back of some scarecrow's shack by Heritage's most charming and desirable couple, the cowboy and the prom queen. So they'd pinned her out like yesterday's laundry, long spikes driven into the sand holding her feet and her arms as far apart from each other as her skeleton would allow.

So the killer dolphin was giving her the evil eye while the cowboy cleaned his cradle's guns meaningfully. So the Goth-girl was rooting around in Ace's rucksack, and rattling the silver deodorant canisters inside a little too vigorously for her own good. At least there was a plus side. Three, in fact.

Advantage number one; the Doctor always said the best way to find out the bad guys' plans was to let them capture you. No self-respecting bad guy can resist a good gloat.

Advantage number two; it looked like dolphins were no different to men when it came to having a girl completely at their mercy. Bernard was twitching with impatience, and couldn't resist demonstrating how big and powerful he was in his shining silver cradle. Ace didn't know if dolphins had testosterone, but if they didn't Bernard was teeming with something very like it.

Advantage number three; this was the biggie. Ace gave an experimental tug on the stake holding her arms painfully in place. The sand was soft, and the stake short; it wobbled easily, and threatened to pop right out of the ground before she was even ready.

'Don't worry,' the girl said softly, batting her eyelids coquettishly. 'The sun won't kill you. Not for at least a couple of hours.'

Ace smiled at her, sweetly.

'Yeah,' her boyfriend joined in. 'You probably won't have to wait that long.'

'Is that a pistol in your pocket?' Ace replied casually.

'Because if it's not, your girlfriend won't be very happy, will she,

mush?’

Ed gave his girlfriend a furtive glance, but Ace wasn't quick enough to see Christa's response. She smiled to herself anyway; this was like being kidnapped by playschool kids. They'd be threatening her with Chinese burns next.

‘I don't think you're being very responsive to the situation here,’ Bernard's cultured voice mused idly. ‘If it was me lying down there, I'd be trying very hard to give me a reason not to shoot you. A very good reason.’

Bernard's cradle creaked as he stepped forwards, pulling away from Ed's hands. The guns glistened on his underbelly.

Ace tensed her arms against the stake.

‘Not a lot of point, is there, mate?’ she countered. The sun was starting to hurt her eyes, not to mention her already burnt shoulders. ‘If small, dark and corpse-like over there knocks the top off that canister, we'll all get blown sky-high anyway.’

Bernard didn't flinch, but Ace was gratified to see Christa slide the Nitro-9 back into her rucksack. At least now she could let the goading commence without having to wonder whether she'd accidentally get her insides spread all over the desert for the vultures to inspect. If they had vultures on Heritage.

Bernard, Ed and Christa began to edge closer. Well, the kind with feathers then, she reconsidered.

‘Explosives?’ the dolphin asked, his translator making it sound like an invitation for dinner. ‘Why would "just a visitor"

need to bring explosives with them?’

Ace smiled sweetly again, and said:

‘So I could stick them down your throat and make some sushi.’

Bernard's eyes narrowed at that, making them even smaller than normal. Ace kept tally of the victory in her head, careful not let her own emotions betray her.

‘Why do you have to do that?’ Bernard said calmly, the translation all but drowning out the angry clicking of his true voice. He sounded like

a Geiger counter in a nuclear war. 'I am not a fish. When will you just accept that I'm a person, just like you?'

Ace made a show of considering.

'When you get opposable thumbs?'

The cradle tilted over her, pushing Bernard's face right up close to hers. She could see – and smell – the remains of his dinner caught in his razor-sharp teeth. Briefly, she wondered whether he had some machine to clean them for him, or if he got Ed to do that too. Then the guns in his frame clicked meaningfully. Careful, Ace, don't push him too far; the Doctor wouldn't be too proud of her first solo flight if she got herself shot.

'You've got a big mouth,' he told her conversationally. Ace could practically see the words as they echoed around his throat.

'And you've got a big temper,' she said evenly, fixing her eyes to his. 'Is that what convinced the Heyworths to "move"?''

She wondered if whatever device translated her words for Bernard would manage to place such emphasis on the last word.

Bernard twitched, just slightly.

His answer was drowned out by the explosion.

Ace's first thought was for Christa. Even before the sand settled, her eyes whipped round to where the woman had been sitting, expecting to see a smoking crater and a tear of black fabric. Instead, Ace saw the dark-eyed woman looking around in a panic and covering her abused ears; the explosion had actually gone off a few feet behind her, sending the sand flying in the air and her eardrums ringing. Ace's rucksack was still safe and sound between her booted feet. Somebody else was making the fireworks. Great; just when she was getting somewhere with the dolphin.

A second explosion went off, this one closer to Ed. He all but dived for cover with his tail between his legs. The dust rained down on his battered leather jacket.

Oh well; waste not want not, Ace thought.

With one quick jerk, Ace pulled the stake out of the loose sand and brought it down on Bernard's smooth grey forehead.

Hard. The dolphin's cradle staggered slightly, before dropping to one knee and shaking as its driver shook his head and shouted in pain.

'Apricot danger,' his translator announced proudly. Either it was having trouble keeping up with Bernard's frantic clicking, or else Ace had hit him harder than she thought.

She didn't wait to find out the answer. She sat bolt upright and pulled the stake at her feet out too, taking a couple of seconds to untie them both from her limbs. Another explosion blistered the air as she jumped up and raced over to collect her rucksack. Christa was trying to pull herself back together despite being in the firing line, when Ace gave her a firm shove in the chest that sent her over onto her back.

'Excuse me, coming through,' Ace said, and scooped up her rucksack and jacket, pulling the dusty material over her burning shoulders.

Then she ran.

She ran for about ten yards before she was caught.

Looking back over her shoulder at the three cowboys as they started to pull themselves to their feet and look about for the source of the explosions, she wasn't paying attention to where she was going. First rule of making a good escape; make sure you know where you're escaping to. Instead of getting clean away, she ran straight into a strong pair of arms that automatically closed around her as she tumbled into the dust. Ace pulled herself free, all ready to break out running again, when she looked down at who she'd run into.

Bristling eyebrows, greying hair and warm eyes all looked back up at her.

It was Lee, and he was holding what looked like a stick of dynamite in his hand.

'I thought you might need some help,' he said awkwardly, an apology fighting to escape his eyes. 'So I tried to distract them with some explosions.'

Ace pulled herself to her feet and offered Lee a hand to help him up. The old guy was surprisingly light – he must still be in pretty good shape under all that denim. The dynamite in his hand looked interesting too, a thin red stick like a stick of rock with a small depression at the top that was obviously a trigger.

Still, there was plenty of time to discuss the finer points of detonation techniques once they were away from Bernard and his helpers.

‘You call that an explosion?’ she said conversationally, rummaging into her rucksack with a free hand.

She pulled out one of the silver canisters with a flourish and a grin. Looking behind her, Christa and Ed were just about back on their feet – another couple of seconds, and they’d be after her. Ace flicked the top from the Nitro-9 with her thumb. It made a quiet popping sound, and landed in the dust at her feet.

She didn’t bother with the timer, just gave the detonator a slap and hurled the explosive in a gentle arc. It landed a few feet short of Bernard.

There was an almighty peal of thunder, and her three pursuers disappeared into a cloud of red dust.

‘*That’s* an explosion,’ she told a bemused Lee. ‘Come on, we’ve got to find the Doctor.’

She didn’t even look to see if he was following, just started to jog back out to the Adobe Flats.

The Doctor’s eyes flicked open, staring up at the roughly carved cavern roof again. The dust-stuffed mattress pressed delicately up at him, supporting his abused back. His muscles felt raw and alive, bristling with power; he doubted there would even be bruising to show for his dramatic escape from Bernard and Ed.

Perhaps he’d even manage to convince Ace that everything had gone exactly as he had planned.

Most importantly, he was awake and his eyes were open. He knew what he had to do. It was something of a relief, after so long living with doubt, trying to second-guess the delicate weaving of the timelines, of being unsure. Now he had a plan; all he had to do was enact it.

As soon as he found a way out of the mines, of course.

He swung himself upright in one easy movement, not feeling even a twinge. Resting next to him on the makeshift bed were his umbrella and hat. He picked them both up, knocked the dust from them before twirling the panama up his arm until it dropped onto his wiry hair. A

showy little trick, a brief distraction, but a pleasing one. He hadn't allowed himself such diversions recently; perhaps he still had enough time to get in a quick bout of juggling?

His eyes fell on the foot of the bed, where three Fussies were rolling over each other, each trying to get the better view of the stranger. No, perhaps there wasn't much time for juggling, after all. 'Good afternoon,' the Doctor said cheerfully, after checking his pocket watch. He raised his hat in greeting at the little robots, before asking: 'I don't suppose any of you three have any voice synthesiser units connected to your mainframe, do you?'

The little robots said nothing, just continued tumbling.

'Thought not,' the Doctor conceded, and dropped his hat back on his head. 'Perhaps I'll just take a little look round, instead.'

The Doctor started to move forward, away from the bed, and suddenly everything changed. The robots stopped playfully falling over each other, and turned on him. The two larger Fussies edged to the front, shielding the smaller behind their dusty red bodies, their lights glowing like eyes, their motors whining agitatedly. The Doctor looked bemused, holding his hands above his head and turning away from the little cleaners.

'Alright, I'll come quietly,' he said. 'Take me to your leader.'

Immediately, the Fussies stopped growling at him, and started to edge away from him, slowly.

The Doctor turned, his eyebrow raised at the little robots'

behaviour.

'Hmm,' he said quietly, his umbrella dropping to his lips again.

The Doctor took a few experimental steps towards the opening at the other side of the cavern. Nothing happened. His lips to the umbrella's handle again, he tapped lightly on its torn hide with a finger. He took two steps back towards the Fussies, and was again greeted by glowing eyes and growling motors. If he didn't know better...

The Doctor knelt down in the grime, and held out a hand to the robots, as if they were dogs or cats. One of the two larger Fussies edged cautiously forward and pressed its mouth against the Doctor's rough skin. There was a brief hiss as the vacuum sucked on it, pulling

the skin taut into its mouth. Then the vacuum silenced and the Fussy backed slowly away.

After a second, the two Fussies parted, allowing the Doctor access to the smaller cleaner.

He held out his hand again, and this time the small Fussy slid up onto the Doctor's palm, sniffing gently at his skin with its vacuum. The Doctor smiled, hesitantly at first, but soon it thawed right up his face until his eyes were warm and human again.

'Thank you. I don't know what I've done to deserve your trust,' the Doctor cooed at the baby Fussy. Then his eyes fell on one of the tiny buildings beside him. 'Although I think I can guess.'

Through the wide and low door, the Doctor could make out a small box-like room. The buildings were all bungalows – the Fussies had obviously decided that stairs were not for their brick-like bodies – and all designed with the same general feel as those in the city above. The one the Doctor was staring into, for example, was the spit of the ground floor of Cole's bar, except for one detail; where Cole had a sweeping mirror behind the bar, the Fussies had instead displayed a tattered piece of paper. The more he looked at it, the easier it became to recognise certain features it described. It was the blueprint for the Fussies.

In certain places, it was dotted with annotations and additions in a flowing hand that the Doctor easily recognised.

Mel.

The Fussy on his palm performed a brief wiggle that, according to the schematics on display, it really shouldn't have been able to do. It did, though, and rolled itself onto its back, exposing its mouth and its belly for the Doctor's inspection. The Doctor turned his attention back to the little robot, tickling his fingers over its smooth underbelly and letting the tips play over its gaping mouth. There were traces of red powder around the opening, the remains of its dinner, perhaps.

'Yes, you're right,' the Doctor agreed softly. 'No more brooding. Not today. I should be glad she managed to find an outlet for her talents. That she managed to make a difference, somewhere. Although how she managed to programme you to recognise me is something of a mystery. Pheromonal recognition software?'

Unsurprisingly, the Fussies didn't answer. The one rolled again in the

Doctor's hand, whilst the other two looked on cautious, protective, proud.

'No, you're right; where would she get the data?' a thought struck him. 'Unless I go back later and give it to her myself?

That's the trouble with time travel; you can never quite know all the answers. I'm still not entirely sure how she ended up in this time period, you know. Perhaps it means I'll meet her again. I hope so.'

The Doctor caught himself again, and looked down at the baby Fussy still ceaselessly tumbling in his hands, as if only for their mutual enjoyment. The Doctor smiled, again playing the role of the benevolent uncle.

'No brooding,' he said firmly. 'Sometimes it doesn't matter how we got here. All that matters is we're here now.'

The Doctor lifted his hat to the two large Fussies that were still sitting watching him.

'My friend did a wonderful job putting you together,' he said, and then his eyes noticed something on the baby's belly. Or rather, didn't notice something. 'Except she didn't put *you* together, did she.'

The Doctor was looking down at the baby's seamless belly, where – according to the blueprints – there should be a serial number and the makers' mark. But the baby's belly was smooth and clean, no marks at all.

The Doctor looked at the larger Fussies, and doffed his hat again.

'I'm impressed,' he admitted, bowing slightly to the robots.

'You must be very proud.'

The two larger Fussies shifted slightly, as if bowing back at the Doctor.

The Doctor sighed and sat back down on the bed.

'It's just a shame Mel didn't manage to give you a vocal capacity,' he sighed. 'I get the feeling that you know a lot more about what's going on here than you can tell me.'

The Doctor looked at the three robots sadly, not expecting an answer.



One was provided, regardless.

The lead Fussy, the one that had pushed itself forward when the Doctor's presence threatened the baby, slid its underbelly on the slick rock floor. It gave out a sharp squeak that immediately drew the Doctor's eyes to it. Then it began motoring around the bed they had made, trying to lead the Doctor around to the other side. The Doctor shrugged. He let the baby hop out of his hand and onto the dust-filled mattress, before swinging around to examine the tiny buildings on the other side.

The largest Fussy was bobbing backwards and forwards outside just one of the buildings, a tin shack made out of scraps of metal, polythene and what looked like dried mud.

The Doctor saw something that glistened and glimmered in the pale light.

He tutted:

'I'll have to be more careful around you little magpies in future.'

The Doctor reached out and pulled the TARDIS key from where it spun and shimmered on the outside of the Fussy's home.

But the Fussy didn't stop bobbing. It was becoming more and more agitated, its motors whining and humming like a bored child. Its flat nose kept bobbing in and out of the doorway of the little house, just the nose, nothing more. The implication was obvious; the Doctor knelt down again in the mud, twisting his head so that he could see inside. He had to squint; the mine wasn't particularly well lit, and inside the houses was no better.

His hat decided that it was bored with being sat on his head doing nothing, and began to roll again. It landed on the slick floor, the straw drinking thirstily at the dirty water. The Doctor didn't notice; he was looking at something.

To say he recognised it instantly would be a lie. He knew what it was – you didn't travel around the highways and byways of the universe without picking up a thing or two – but he didn't classify it instantly. He took a few moments to be sickened by what it was covered in.

Slowly, the Doctor pushed his fingers into the house.

The instrument was heavy and golden, more like a statuette than a

medical tool.

It was also covered in thick, dark, dry blood.

‘Oh Mel,’ the Doctor said, his voice barely more than a breath, ‘I’m so sorry.’

Episode Three

Chapter Fourteen

6. August, 6048 CE

15:11

Ace strode purposefully across the desert, her feet sinking into the sand once again. She could feel the grains of red dust push their way into the tiniest gaps in the toughened leather, desperate to be warm and safe inside her boots, resting between the toes until they had gathered enough allies to push Ace clean out of them. The sun was still beating down overhead, singeing her shoulders again, flaking skin that thought it had been granted enough respite to survive. It was either that or sweat herself into a puddle in her jacket again.

At least this time, she thought, I’ve got company.

Behind her, Lee was just pulling his dusty shirt from his jeans, allowing the air to circulate around his broad-shouldered body. His face was turning an interesting shade of red, but aside from that the older man was showing no signs of being bothered by the sand, or the sun, or the heat. But then he had lived out here for possibly more years than Ace had even existed; if he wasn’t used to it by now, well, he shouldn’t be hanging around here any more.

‘You’re going in the wrong direction,’ he called to her, casually.

Ace stopped and scanned the horizon, using one hand to shade her eyes from the sun; it wasn’t quite as bright now, and had long since passed overhead, but it was still pretty powerful when you were trying to see where the desert ended. In a few more hours, Ace guessed it would be dusk – the sun already having a reddish tint to it – and then darkness. And that was when monsters liked to come out. Having got her bearings, Ace turned back to fix Lee with a glance; if he was deliberately trying to lead her astray...

‘The farm was over there,’ she said, following her nose with a finger. ‘I

can see it.'

Lee agreed, nodding serenely as he pulled up beside her.

'Yes, that's where your friend caused a cave-in,' he said evenly, not looking at the fire in Ace's eyes. They both knew who and what had caused the cave-in. 'And the ground around there will still be dangerous until it's had some time to settle down. But over there...'

Lee paused, and pointed, off to the left, away from the dry remains of the farm house. Ace squinted, and could just make out a dark patch in the shifting sands. She looked back to Lee, an eyebrow raised.

'Over there is the mine entrance,' he explained. 'The main shaft leads straight under where your friend fell through. We'll be able to help him, without killing ourselves.'

'You don't know the Doctor,' Ace responded without hesitation. 'We're not going there to save him; he'll have done that by himself already. We're going there to find out what the plan is.'

'The mines run deep, Ace,' Lee began, his voice low and soothing.

Ace wouldn't hear any of it:

'Trust me. You'll understand once we get there.'

And she headed off again, not even looking to see if he was following. But she didn't follow her nose this time. No, she followed Lee's instructions and walked towards the smear of darkness that was the mine entrance. Perhaps it was because –

despite herself – she trusted him; perhaps there was something in her that was always looking for a father figure, a Doctor substitute. Perhaps there was just too much past for her to ever truly shake off, become her own person. Or perhaps it was just that she was glad for any directions that led her away from the farm, from the burnt-out marker to a family grave.

Lee just shook his head gently, dislodging a few strands of grey, slicked hair.

He looked over his shoulder, just once, and then set off after her. As she walked, Ace tried to consider the evidence before her. If she could solve this mystery, if she could work it all out without the Doctor's hints and suggestions, then perhaps she would have proved something. Perhaps he'd trust her with the big stuff, the important stuff. Perhaps he would tell her the dark thoughts that had kept him on the run these last few months, ducking into shadows, avoiding the glare of the sun.

Ace glanced up at the bloated white sun.

Look at me, Daddy. Aren't I clever? Aren't I good?

Sometimes, Ace wondered what would have happened to her, if she'd never met the Doctor. Would things be different, would *she* be different? Or did her experiences count for nothing? She didn't doubt it; when she thought about herself before the Doctor, when she imagined that line continuing on into adulthood...What she saw made her shiver. She saw bitterness. She saw her frustrations lashing out again and again, until the constant conflict only turned itself inwards, centring on her. She saw herself finding someone unsuitable – probably someone like Lee, twice her age and suitably imposing. He'd treat her like a child, and she'd be glad, the responsibility of thinking for herself just one more thing to cause her grief. But she'd been spared that. She'd met the Doctor, and he'd slapped her round the face and opened her eyes wide to the universe. He'd shown her beauty, and fun, and explosions she could only ever have dreamed of back home. He'd shown her what injustice really was, shown her things that made her realise what the words 'it's not *fair!*' really meant and how often she'd wasted them because she hadn't got her own way. He'd saved her. Whatever had been waiting for her on Earth – crime, bitterness, anger – he'd taken her away from that and given her her future back. He'd seen something in no-hoper Dorothy that no teacher, no social worker, no relative, ever had. She loved him for that. Not that she'd

ever tell him, of course.

But then, it had been her fate to meet the Doctor. It had been all planned out centuries before she was even born. And you couldn't escape your fate, could you?

'We're nearly there,' Lee said behind her.

It was only as she turned to look back at her footprints that Ace realised how far they had come, the two of them. They trailed back across the desert, blurring and melting as the wind picked them up and ran with them. They would lead her back, if she chose to follow them now; all the way back, perhaps. Back to her home where she could curl up in safety and not think about anything ever again.

Up ahead, the mine's gaping mouth waited for her, dark and uncertain.

'Right,' she said.

Lee stood beside her, not speaking. He felt like a rock, just inches from her skin. An impassive feature of the landscape, just there. His eyes were on the darkness, too; what he was thinking, Ace couldn't tell. But she could guess.

Thoughts flashed across her brain, too fast for her to even guess where they might have come from. She could see the farmhouse – not the blackened ruin it had been when she saw it, but the living, breathing home it had been. She could see Mel, grinning and chirpy, her red hair soaking in the sunlight and radiating it back out again. She could see fire. She could see darkness. She could see Mel as she'd been, when she had last seen her; waving goodbye to the Doctor and embracing her new life with that same effervescent energy. She could see herself, waving goodbye.

Ace knew that Bernard had had something to do with Mel's death. The dolphin knew something, was hiding something and was willing to kill to make sure it stayed hidden. He had his two cronies to back him up – had the town completely under his flipper. But then something told her that the answer to the puzzle was in the mines. Things disappeared on Heritage; she knew that – looking through her rucksack, she'd discovered one of her cans of Nitro-9 had gone walkies, too. Things, animals, people.

Instinct told her there were monsters here, creatures scuttling in the dark; evil. It had got so she could smell it, she'd been fighting it for so

long. Heritage reeked of it.

The answer was in the mines. She really should go in and find it.

‘Right,’ she said again.

She could hear Lee breathing softly, the air rasping through the hairs in his nose.

‘I’m sure he’s alright,’ he said, placing a firm hand on her shoulders. The flesh sizzled against her raw shoulders, skin melting into skin.

She gave him a look, and then realised that he still thought she was worried for the Doctor’s safety. Well, he’d learn.

‘Right,’ she said, more firmly, more decisively. After all, she was Ace; she had a reputation to uphold. ‘I’ll go first.’

Lee looked like he was about to protest, but then something else happened. Ace put a hand to his chest, pushed him instinctively to the ground. She fell on top of him, her rucksack and jacket falling into the sand beside them. He was trapped, pinned to the floor beneath her legs. Ace could feel her skirt pulling tight against her thighs. She tried to remind herself that it wasn’t the sort of thing she needed to worry about with Lee, and very nearly succeeded.

He looked shocked. Ace looked about, left and right, as if trying to see whether anyone could see them. The land all around was flat, nothing but sky and sand. There wasn’t even a cactus to hide behind.

‘Ace –’ Lee began, hesitantly.

Ace put a finger to her lips, still desperately looking for somewhere to hide.

‘Something’s coming,’ she hissed. Her eyes flicked towards the dark cavern.

‘You mean someone,’ Lee corrected unthinkingly.

Ace didn’t say anything.

‘Am I interrupting something?’ a cheerful voice called out from the shaft’s mouth. ‘I could always go back and wait for certain death?’

‘Professor!’

From the look on Lee's face, you couldn't tell whether he was more surprised that the Doctor had turned up alive or relieved that Ace was no longer straddling him.

'Now, now, Ace,' the Doctor chided. 'You didn't really think I was dead, did you?'

'Come on, Professor,' Ace deadpanned. 'I just wanted to know what the caving's like round here.'

'Ah. Interesting, Ace. Very interesting.'

The Doctor grinned, then, and Ace just couldn't help grinning back. It was as if nothing had ever happened, as if the dark and brooding Doctor had never taken up residence and it had been *her* Doctor every second of every day. Whatever had happened in the mines, it had done the Time Lord the power of good. Perhaps he'd already found the monsters, and sent them scuttling back to Monstra Prime, or wherever the hell they came from.

The Doctor reached out and flicked her nose playfully.

Ace nearly melted.

'You were right, Ace,' he murmured, just to her. 'We can't let them get away with it.'

There wasn't anything she could say, then.

'You must be the Doctor,' Lee said, his face showing the first signs of realising what an unstoppable force the Doctor was.

As if plummeting to certain death could stop *him*!

'And you must be..' the Doctor paused and looked at Ace.

'Well, you must be a friend of Ace's whom I'm sure I'll get to know once we've moved away from here.'

The Doctor doffed his hat then, and Lee had no option left but to smile at the little man. Ace was smiling herself, and she'd seen the routine thousands of times before. It was like watching Billy Connolly or listening to Eddie Murphy on one of those old tapes you really shouldn't have; it didn't matter if you'd heard it before, when they tried with all their heart it gave the whole thing an energy that made it irresistible. Not for the first time, Ace realised that the Doctor could

take over the world in an instant, if that was what he wanted.

‘And what’s the plan, Doctor?’ Lee asked, and the Doctor raised an eyebrow.

Ace smiled at that.

‘I told you we weren’t coming to rescue him,’ she said.

The Doctor shook his head slowly.

‘We need to let the universe know that something has happened here,’ the Doctor said, his eyes misting slightly.

‘Something terrible. Ace, I need you to contact our shuttle. The pilot will be able to put a call in to the Adjudicators. This sort of situation is more their kind of thing. And I’ll see if I can’t make Sheriff see reason, before we leave.’

The smile froze on Ace’s face, icicles forming and dragging it down into a frown.

‘But,’ she said, and stopped. Was there any way she could put the feeling in her belly into words? ‘But Professor..’

‘No, Ace. We can’t get involved,’ he looked at her, his eyes suddenly sad. Ace tried desperately to remember whether they’d always been that sad, whether the sadness had always been there and the sudden joy was just a ploy that had fooled all of them.

She couldn’t. ‘Please, Ace. Trust me.’

Trust him. How many times had that got her into trouble?

‘They won’t let that happen, Doctor,’ Lee said gravely.

Looking at him, Ace could tell the spell had been broken with him, too. ‘The only way to get an off-planet line is to go through Cole. And to get to Cole, you’ll have to go through Bernard.’

The Doctor’s face fell, a giant hole punched clean through his carefully laid plan. Ace could feel it slipping away from her; as he’d walked out of that mine, wiping the dust from his clothing, she’d been sure he was back, that he would whirl through the town like a dervish and blow out all the cobwebs.

Now she was starting to wonder if he’d even be able to get his hat



back onto his head without poking his eyes out. Something just wasn't right.

Was this how Mel had felt, before she'd left him?

The Doctor smiled, some spark still glinting in his eye, despite everything.

'Then we'll just have to use somebody else's line, won't we.'

'Didn't you hear me? Cole operates the switchboard, there is no other line, Doctor.'

The Doctor tapped his nose conspiratorially, dropping Ace a sly wink.

'No,' he purred, 'but there could be. .'

## Chapter Fifteen

6. August, 6048 CE

15:45

Sheriff wasn't one for spending a lot of time in his jailhouse. It made him feel too much like a jailer. The beauty about being the law in a small town like Heritage was that you knew everybody better than they knew themselves. There was no unsolved crime in Heritage, because everybody knew who had done what to whom before they were halfway through doing it. Sheriff's job wasn't to enforce the law, to punish the wrong-doers, it was to walk around the town and smile at people. Remind them they were part of a community, and the community had wide eyes and a long memory. He was a symbol, that was all; a symbol that nobody could get away with anything in a town like Heritage.

You didn't lock symbols away in dusty plasticrete rooms with one window, one door, one desk and one chair for company. No, you set them out where everybody could see them, and admire the craftsmanship. Sheriff liked to spend his time with people, with friends, and so he didn't have much time for the jailhouse, no.

Somewhere along the line, though, something had changed.

As he walked the dusty street, he started to feel people's eyes on him, heavier than usual. He could feel them pressing down on him, feel the way they looked at him and screamed at him to do *something* – to *save*

them – all without saying a word. They turned to him without even realising they were doing it, looking to him to give them something they couldn't give themselves. And when he didn't, when he couldn't...he was their symbol, their tarnished mirror; he was the reflection of everything they didn't want to see.

Slowly, Bernard and those kids he used for ego-support started swaggering around the streets, every day claiming an inch more of it for themselves. It got so that Sheriff didn't feel right out there any more. He lost the battle for the street, and instead turned to greeting and reassuring his charges from a stool in Cole's bar and grill. After all, Cole's was the hub of Heritage; everybody went to Cole's at some point in the day. Why ache your feet walking to them, when they would come to you?

Only they didn't come to him. When people wanted something doing, something arranging, they went to Bernard.

Everyone was afraid of Bernard. Even Sheriff.

He knew when it had started to happen. He could pin it down to the exact night.

So could everyone on Heritage.

Since that night, Cole's had seemed ever more welcoming, that one stool moulding itself until it complemented his ample buttocks perfectly. The street had seemed ever hotter, the sun overhead burning into his red skin and slowly spit-roasting his flesh. The jailhouse had seemed ever darker, the corners breeding things that made his skin crawl. There was no indigenous life on Heritage, despite the ample provision of air and water. Everything that grew had been brought with them when they broke the first earth all those years ago, from the trees on the streets to the bacteria that made them rot. Despite that, Sheriff was still sure there were things living in the dark corners of his life, things older and darker than anything the colonists could have brought with them.

He could hear them scuttling when he drank, and the only way he could think to block them out was to drink more. Shot on shot on shot, until he was deaf drunk.

That was why he didn't like to spend too much time in the jailhouse now. It was dark and dusty and lonely in here. He could hear them, just the other side of his head, scuttling inside him.

He could feel them tearing him apart. But this afternoon, he had no choice. After Bernard and his kids had ridden out after the Doctor, Cole had refused to serve him any more. Or perhaps it was after Sheriff had stayed and not gone after Bernard and his kids that Cole had stopped serving. Either way, he was getting no more drink out of Cole, not even if he offered his arm in a fair trade for Cole's. And so he'd headed back to the jailhouse.

Partly because he had nowhere else to go, but mostly because he knew that somewhere in there he had a bottle of vodka stashed for just such an emergency.

All he had to do was find it.

So far he hadn't had much luck, but goddess he had moved heaven and earth in his searching. The place was a ruin; the chair was lying on its side on the floor (possibly he'd hollowed out the frame and poured the vodka into there); the cell door was on its hinges (perhaps he'd locked it away in an attempt to sober up); the dust and the pictures had been thrown around the floor with equal abandon (damn it, the stuff had to be *somewhere*!). His search was in vain. He still hadn't found his vodka. If only he hadn't been so drunk when he'd hidden it.

If only he wasn't such a washed-up old drunk, full stop.

'Spring-cleaning?' came a voice from the doorway. Sheriff couldn't even bring himself to look. 'I was never very good at it either.'

Sheriff didn't want to turn around, didn't want to feel that chill shiver through his bones when he saw those cold, grey eyes.

They were two pinpricks in the fabric of the universe; look into them, and you could see into the vacuum of infinity.

'We're closed,' he drawled, pulling his chair up off the floor and settling his ample frame into it. To make matters clearer, he leant back and closed his eyes.

If he tried really hard, he might be able to convince himself that he couldn't feel the stranger, just *there* making his skin prickle.

'I had heard that justice never slept,' the voice said in the darkness.

'Now that's where you're confused, mister. We don't do justice here,' Sheriff ran a slab of a hand over his face, feeling his scalp bristle

under his rough touch. He could feel the sweat soaking him. 'Maybe you should go talk to Bernard. He does the justice around here.'

'Now we both know that's not true,' the voice said softly.

Sheriff couldn't help himself. He had to open his eyes.

The little man was standing there, his hands behind his back holding that damned stupid umbrella, his hat jammed on his head almost as an afterthought. He looked just the same as he had when he'd stepped off the shuttle that morning; same dark jacket; same stupid pullover; same grey checked trousers; same piebald shoes. The only way you could tell he'd been on the planet at all before that moment was the way the dust had started to cling to him, giving everything he wore a translucent pink glow, like a neon bulb advertising conspicuousness.

But no, something had changed since that morning. There was more steel in the way he held himself, something determined and set in the shoulders. He had a glint in his eyes, a cold fire that lit their icy grey depths. And damn it if he didn't seem a little taller. He'd said it since the moment he'd clapped eyes on him, and Sheriff was never more sure of it than in that one moment: this little guy was a hell of a lot of trouble, just waiting to go bang.

Sheriff was quite relieved that the vodka sloshing around inside him meant that he couldn't focus on the little stranger's eyes. And they said drink wasn't the answer.

'Listen, Doc,' he sighed, all the energy rushing out of his body along with the breath. 'I don't know what you've found, or what you think you've found. I don't even know if I care. But I'm going to level with you; there ain't nothing you can do about what's gone on here. It's past. It's forgotten. You try dredging it all up into the open and the people here, they'll kill you. Just so they can go about their business pretending it's all forgotten.'

He tried again to fix the Doctor with a stare.

In the end, he decided it would perhaps be less ambitious but more realistic to settle for glaring at the little man's dark hairline.

'Including me,' he said solemnly.

The Doctor didn't say anything. He just took a step further into the room, out of the red glare of the afternoon sun, his hands still firmly behind his back. His shoes kicked up the dust a little, but it would

settle again, by and by. No Fussy ever bothered Sheriff in his jailhouse any more; they had got too tired of dodging bottles and swearwords.

Sheriff tried to stand to meet the little man with equal determination.

His legs wouldn't even move.

'I agree entirely,' the Doctor said, evenly.

Sheriff nearly fell clean off his chair.

'I'm starting to think I've spent far too much time getting involved in other people's business, meddling and tinkering until I've botched up a solution that suits my mood. But I don't need to, do I? Because people can make their own solutions. People have a right to make decisions about their own fates without someone barging in and telling them what's right,' the Doctor had a look in his eye. What it was, Sheriff couldn't tell. 'Take away that right, and who knows what fate you might steer them towards.'

There was a silence, hanging in the air, waiting to swoop like a vulture.

'People can do what's right, can make things right, no matter what they've done in the past,' the Doctor announced finally, fixing Sheriff in place with a single glance. 'Can't they, Sheriff?'

And with that, his hands unfolded from behind his back. His umbrella remained clutched in his left; what he held in his right struck the top of Sheriff's desk with a hollow thud. The stranger looked at Sheriff with cold grey eyes, and took a step back, distancing himself from the object. And, by implication, disowning it entirely. Leaving it in Sheriff's capable hands.

Sheriff looked down.

'It's a tool,' the Doctor said softly. 'It's a little old, a little rusty, but it might even still work. The dark stains on it, well they're blood. I'm sure you have the facilities somewhere amongst your spring-cleaning to perform a rudimentary DNA test. If you do, you'll find that the blood belongs to Melanie Heyworth. Possibly her husband, Benjamin. No, no; I think it's definitely Mel's.'

Sheriff didn't move, not wanting to touch it, not wanting to breathe near it. He didn't want to do anything that might be construed as taking possession of the device. If he did, then he was terrified by

what he might have to do with it.

‘It identifies the components of individual gene strands,’ the Doctor announced. ‘And it’s standard equipment for any would-be geneticist.’

And with that, the Doctor doffed his hat, and turned and left. Sheriff didn’t see him go. He was staring down at the hefty tool in the middle of his desk, growling accusingly at him.

Somewhere in the room, a lost bottle of vodka called to him.

He tried not to listen to either of them.

Ace was pressed firmly between a rock and a hard place. Well, another rock to be honest, but somehow that didn’t have the same ring to it. Above her, the ceiling of the mine was pressing her down. Below her, the floor was pushing her up. In between, there was barely enough room for her to squeeze through. If the ceiling and floor hadn’t been oozing a slick mud, she probably would have been stuck fast. As it was, it was a tricky manoeuvre to pull herself forwards as her elbows and feet hit against rock with each pull. Every inch she moved forwards, her rucksack followed her, its shoulder strap looped precariously over her ankle. Behind that, Lee was following in a similar fashion, his broad frame having even more difficulty squeezing through.

‘Do you know what gets me?’ Ace grunted as she slid forwards again.

Lee didn’t respond, just pulled himself forwards inch by inch in her wake.

‘This is the only way through, right?’ she said.

‘You’ve already asked me that,’ Lee panted, trying to sound good-natured. ‘The ceiling must have caved in since I was last here.’

‘So anyone trying to get from here to where we’re going would have to go this way,’ she repeated, not even waiting for Lee’s response. She managed to steal a glance down; her T-shirt was slick with mud from ceiling and floor. How could such a dry planet have such damp insides? ‘And anyone coming this way is going to get covered in mud.’

‘You didn’t strike me as the kind of person to be worried by a little mud,’ Lee chastised.

‘Do you remember seeing any mud on the Doctor when he came out?’

she asked flatly.

Lee didn't answer straight away.

'Perhaps we should stay quiet,' he said eventually. 'The ceiling could well be unstable. we don't want to risk another cave-in.'

Which, Ace knew, in other words meant, 'Shut up. I haven't got a clue.'

The Doctor had that kind of effect on people.

She pulled herself forwards another inch. If she craned her neck to look in front of her, she could see the rest of the mine opening out. Another foot and she might be able to stand up with little more than a stoop. Another foot might take half an hour at this pace. She was more than a little surprised to find she wasn't too concerned; the slow going gave her ample time to consider the situation. Or, more accurately, the Doctor's reaction to the situation.

When he'd come ambling out of the mine shaft, swinging his umbrella like he was Fred Astaire tapping down over-sized steps to the waiting arms of Ginger Rogers, it was like he was stepping out at her from months in the past. Here he was at last; the Doctor, not that indecisive, scuttling, little impostor she'd been travelling with these last few months but the original. The one that gave the monsters nightmares, and knew just what to do to set things right. She'd even hoped – no not hoped – she'd *known* that the first thing out of his mouth would be a plan, a plan to bring Mel's killer to justice.

Then he'd all but said it was out of his league, that all they could do was call the police, and hope the gunfire sailed harmlessly over their heads.

Ace couldn't fathom it. It wasn't him. It wasn't the way he worked. But then, in some way, it was too; it would be just like him not to give her all the information, to call the cavalry in to arrive just in the nick of time, whilst he was off confronting the bad guys with their own reflections. So what exactly did he have planned for Sheriff? Just to advise him of the situation? Surely he knew that anyway – after all he'd been the first to warn them off when the shuttle landed. And he had the most to lose if an unsolved crime came to light. It made a perverse kind of sense that the Doctor would get Ace out of the way while he dealt with the dangerous stuff, patting her on the head and saying 'well done' once the smoke had cleared.

So Ace had crawled headfirst into the muddy foxhole at his say so, because when it came down to it – somewhere deep in her – Ace still trusted the Doctor. What he said needed to be done, needed to be done. If you couldn't quite see why, well that was because you weren't looking from the same place as he was.

If you opened your eyes a little wider, maybe squinted, maybe stopped looking in black-and-white and let a little grey enter your vision, well maybe you'd see what he could see. Maybe you wouldn't. Whatever, if he asked, then it was important.

That was what Ace told herself, as she crawled through the tunnels, her clothes slowly becoming as slick and muddy as the walls on all sides. And if it stopped her from thinking, well that was only a happy by-product of doing what was right. If she didn't churn over and over the questions in her head, she wasn't running away from them, she was just following orders. What it meant to find that travel in the TARDIS didn't make you immortal, to find that there were limits to the Doctor's protection, to find that when you confronted him with these limits he didn't immediately leap into action, more dissolved and crumbled...She shook her head; all of these were questions for another time. She had something to do, something important, and she couldn't let herself get distracted. Thankfully.

She was trying to remember the diagram the Doctor had drawn in the thin red sand with the tip of his umbrella. Use this wire, Ace (the wire that was safely coiled up in her rucksack now), and connect this here (tip tap) with this here (tip tap) making sure it doesn't connect with this here (tip tap). Whatever else he had been up to in his untimely grave, the Doctor had also spent a fair deal of time examining the assorted junk the Fussies had been storing for themselves down in the caverns, because as soon as he'd realised they needed a radio he'd been able to pinpoint the exact location of the suitable parts the little vacuums had half-inched. For purposes known only to themselves.

Ace had her instructions; she was to call the shuttle and get it to land. But not before it relayed a distress signal to the intergalactic fuzz and got them to 'ello 'ello as fast as they could to the scene of the crime. If she could find the Fussies' secret underground lair. And find the correct equipment amongst whatever other junk they'd got lying around. And if she could remember the Doctor's speedy lecture on how to connect them up. And assuming whatever passed for batteries on this bloody planet hadn't run down decades ago.

Perhaps the Doctor was feeling more like his old self; his plans were



certainly up to their old standard, anyway.

‘Come on,’ Ace said, hauling herself forwards with her fingernails. ‘I can see the end now.’

Lee said nothing, just followed silently behind her.

Sweetness stood by her window, looking out at the world. It wasn’t doing anything exciting, just sitting there looking back at her. There hadn’t been any movement out there since the dust storm, since Bernard and his friends had ridden back with the girl in the black coat. Still she looked out, rapt attention filling her face as if at any moment something amazing would happen.

Her teddy bear sat on the bed, resting on one side, staring at her with its one good eye. It pleaded with her to be a good little girl and come away from the window, but still she stood, looking.

Downstairs, she could hear Daddy’s big blackbird cawing angrily to itself. At least, it sounded like it was cawing to itself; she couldn’t hear Daddy making any response, so it would probably be cawing at itself. In fact, she hadn’t heard Daddy since there had been all that thunder around the back of the shack. Sweetness’s room only looked out onto the street and so she hadn’t been able to tell what had caused it, since she was a good girl who stayed in her room when she was told to. Which irked her. The positive knowledge that something *exciting* had happened just out of sight, just around the corner, just somewhere else. It was becoming a daily occurrence in her life.

If the teddy bear on the bed had been able to cough pointedly, it would have done so then.

There was a good reason why she had to stay in her room.

Of course there was, there always was. There was a Very Important Event happening tonight, something that meant a lot to her daddy, something that he’d been looking forward to for a long time. Something that involved Sweetness getting dressed up in her nicest dress and smiling nicely at all the clever people.

‘Gentlemen, this is Sweetness Wakeling,’ Daddy would say and she would curtsy and smile. He’d even had her practising it, and of course she’d got it right .because of course she was a good little girl.

All things considered, Sweetness was getting sick of being a good little girl.

Being a good little girl was, frankly, dull.

Somewhere out there in the shifting red sands there was excitement, intrigue and yes, probably danger, but she was a big girl. She could handle it. Somewhere out there, there were little men with funny looking umbrellas, and strange dark-haired women with little badges on their coats. Somewhere out there, there were things that made loud bangs just out of sight where little girls really shouldn't be looking. Sweetness was getting sick of not looking. She wanted to go and look, and have an adventure. She wanted to meet the little man with the funny umbrella and ask him if there was anything else, or if Heritage was all she had to look forward to for the rest of her life.

Somewhere out there, there were walking fish and daddies who would be very angry if she went out and had an adventure without them. Well that was just that and nothing more. Daddies be damned; she was bored.

Something happened then. Something moved, out in the world.

At first, Sweetness jumped back, surprised. It was a little much that the world was just waiting for you to decide to have an adventure before it immediately started springing interesting things on you. It could at least give you a few moments to come to terms with your decision. But no, as soon as her mind was made up, something appeared on her window. Something small and dusty red that fixed her with two little lights through the tough plastic windows.

The Fussy looked at her, and for just a moment its lights flicked, making it look like it had winked. Sweetness smiled, and waved back at it gingerly; Daddy had told her that the little bees were mindless drones and didn't deserve a second's thought, but Sweetness found them cute and liked to be polite to them, whenever she could.

The Fussy twitched back at her, and through some alchemy of antennae and gaping mouth, managed to pop the window clean open. After that, the Fussy vanished.

Sweetness stood staring at the open window for a few moments, more out of surprise than any attack of conscience.

Now she realised how quickly the world twitched its feelers to help a good girl gone temporarily bad, she really wished she'd considered it earlier. Outside the window, there was a ledge more than big enough to support her if she edged along the buildings to somebody else's window. After that, it would be easy to climb inside and make a break

for the sand streets. And who knew what sort of adventure might be found out there?

All she needed to do was take that first, simple step.

The teddy bear on the bed begged her not to go.

Sweetness ignored it.

## Chapter Sixteen

6. August, 6048 CE

16:06

Cole was stood at the corner of his bar, staring across at the blank screen in front of him. He'd used it a few times before – a few more times than anyone else on the planet, so that made him the expert – but not many since that great final statement from the company. Mostly, it was used to make emergency requests when they ran dangerously low on something they couldn't make themselves. Used to announce that they'd scrimped and saved and all they could manage was...Sometimes pity was taken and goods exchanged. Sometimes it wasn't and they weren't, and somehow they managed to survive.

The viewscreen was easy to use. You pointed at where you were, and pointed at where you wanted to talk to, and bingo, there you were. It was so simple a child could use it. The Fussies had probably been ordering vacuum-cleaner porn with it for decades.

Cole stared at the opalescent screen, unable to make it work.

It wasn't that he couldn't move the right icons. He couldn't even bring himself to turn the bloody thing on. He'd been standing in front of the screen pretty much since he'd dragged himself out of hiding from behind the bar, a few minutes after Bernard and the kids had left and just before he'd advised Sheriff to head on home and sleep it off. When he'd strode over, he'd known exactly what he was going to do, who he was going to call, and how loudly he was going to blow the whistle. Everybody's ears would be ringing, even as far as Sale. Now he was stood there, he couldn't even remember how to lift his arms.

'And what have you done about this, Mr Cole?' he could hear them asking.

As soon as he had an answer, he'd turn on the viewscreen and place

the call.

Batta batta.

Cole's heart pounded into his throat as his stomach suddenly decided it might be nice to digest itself. Somehow, his fingers –

which had been so senseless and dull before – found the energy to flick faster than he could see to tap a control by the screen.

The surface shimmered briefly, and then solidified until the large mirror behind the bar was unbroken and smooth again. Cole looked into it, expecting to see Bernard or – Goddess forbid –

Wakeling striding across the plasticrete. It was neither. The Doctor stood patiently at the bar, his hat and umbrella lying in front of him, a beatific smile on his face.

Despite his relief, Cole didn't turn the viewscreen back on.

'Doctor,' he said instead, all Geordie amiability. 'What can I get you?'

The Doctor considered.

'I think perhaps a glass of water, unless you've tea?'

There was something amusing in that, perhaps; the Scot's love of tea, the Englishman's tippie. Cole dug behind the bar and pulled out a chipped white mug and a little patterned tin, placing them reverently on the bar in front of the Doctor. The little man smiled gently to signal his approval, and Cole popped the lid off the tin. The air was suddenly full of the dark aroma of the tea, rich and deep. The Doctor nodded gently. It wasn't just the Chinese who had their tea ceremonies, thought Cole as he dug out a spoonful of the dried leaves.

'You're in luck,' he said, trying to sound upbeat. Perhaps he even managed it. 'Heritage's not got the rain for real tea, but we can make summut as near as like.'

The Doctor seemed to recognise the scent:

'Arcalian nettles,' he sighed, as if the words held some special meaning for only him.

Cole shrugged, spooning the mixture into the cup.

'Mebbies. It was just growing on one of our nutrient bags when we

unloaded.'

The Doctor nodded, as if this was the secret of the universe.

The kettle was flicked on, boiling in an instant. The leaves themselves were imprisoned in a metallic tea-ball, before the boiling water was poured over, leaving something that looked wholly like a good, strong, black cup of tea. The Doctor reached out gratefully and took a deep swig.

'I'll add the water to your bill,' Cole said flatly.

The Doctor didn't seem to hear him.

'It must be quite a strain,' he said conversationally, setting his tea down to rest next to his hat. 'The lack of rain. Sometimes you must crave a good storm, to stir everything up.'

'I don't know,' Cole said, praying the little man was merely talking about the weather. 'It don't rain much on Heritage, but when it comes, it comes.'

The Doctor nodded gently, having apparently received exactly the answer he needed.

'I've been thinking about what you said to me earlier,' he said softly. 'About not getting involved.'

Cole's heart gave up the ghost and just clean burst, there and then.

'Oh aye?' he heard himself say.

'I've always liked humans,' he said, suddenly on a completely different track. 'I've always said that I like humans. But I don't trust them.'

The Doctor smiled then, a charming smile that wiped away any thoughts Cole had been having about what kind of human professed to like other humans, like they were pets or children or something.

'Nothing sinister, you understand. I just don't trust them to sort out their own messes. And that's what humans do, isn't it; create messes. Some good, some bad, but never anything simple,'

the Doctor looked down at his steaming tea again, but didn't sip from it.

Cole tried to resist the urge to lean in and stare into the mug too, to

try and see what pictures held the stranger's gaze so completely.

'And then I come in and rattle them all up into some kind of order, and disappear again happy that I've set things right. No worries about the consequences. No fears for the future.'

There was silence then. It fell like a cold snow over everything, making Cole shiver involuntarily. He looked at the steam coming from the tea, half expecting it to freeze in the air, icicles tinkling onto his bar-top. They didn't though.

'But if I really did love humans, I'd trust them to come to their own solutions, wouldn't I?' the Doctor asked, fixing Cole with inquisitive grey eyes. 'I'd let them make their own decisions, wouldn't I? Not just barge in and assume that I knew best. After all, what if I didn't?'

The Doctor held Cole's gaze, not even blinking. The barman got the impression that an answer was needed, but his messy human mind was coming up blank. In desperation, he motioned towards the steaming mug of tea and asked helpfully:

'Sugar?'

The Doctor shook his head sadly.

'Don't get me started,' he muttered softly.

Cole decided it would probably be best if he said nothing at all. Instead, he tried to figure out whether the Doctor was trying to subtly suggest that Cole should be taking responsibility himself for clearing up this particular typically human mess. The viewscreen taunted him quietly, unseen in its corner. Just three simple functions, and he could be talking to the Adjudicators in moments.

'That's the trouble with asking questions,' the Doctor mused, as if in answer to Cole's thoughts. 'You might not like the answers you dig up.'

'Doctor...' Cole began, but was immediately interrupted. The swing doors rattled against each other again.

'Oh,' the Doctor said, surprised. 'Hello.'

Sweetness didn't say a word, just looked around the bar with wide blue eyes drinking in every detail. The pale floors with their thin skin of dry dust, the dark corners where the Fussies shuffled and winked,

the tall stools and low chairs. The long mirror and the two men who were reflected in it, looking at her in a way she hadn't seen before. Looking at her like she was there, not like she was a brief distraction from something more important. She smiled then, flashing radiant white teeth and creasing perfect pale skin. Her red curls were already growing heavy with the dust in the air.

Cole was lost for words.

'You must be here for the spoon recital,' the Doctor said enthusiastically, pulling two thin pieces of metal from his jacket pocket. 'You're just in time; I was just about to start.'

Without further warning, the little stranger started to rattle the metal 'spoons' against each other, the bar, the stool, his own arms, legs and head. The noise they made...well, at his most charitable, Cole could only describe it as percussive. Even Sweetness wrinkled her nose up at it, casting a furtive glance over her shoulder to weigh up the chances of retreat. At that moment, though, it was the sound of angels singing. It was the most beautiful distraction Cole had ever been honoured enough to hear. It kept his mind and heart from sinking with the weight of the guilt that that little girl always filled him with.

Little Sweetness Heyworth.

'It's getting a little tight here: Lee's voice came out of the darkness behind Ace. 'Perhaps we should try to find another way?'

Ace didn't bother turning; she knew she wouldn't see him.

The walls up to this point had glowed with a gentle green phosphorescence, which was either natural or something to do with the people who had dug the mines. It had petered out as soon as the walls had begun to close in, leaving them in total darkness and unable to tell if they were blinking without using their fingers. Perhaps the miners hadn't made it this deep. She could've asked Lee she supposed, but his nervousness was starting to edge back into his voice with every step. Anything she could do to make herself appear cool, calm and knowledgeable could only help bolster his confidence, or at least make him too nervous to question her.

'Do you know another way?' Ace asked curtly.

Silence, and darkness.

'No,' Lee admitted eventually. 'I don't.'

Ace continued edging herself forwards, her fingers pressed tight against the walls in the hope of feeling them begin to spread out again. No such luck so far.

‘Well then,’ she snapped back. ‘The Doctor made it through, so we must be able to too.’

Of course, the Doctor had also made it through without getting so much as a smear of mud on his jacket, but there was no need to bring that up again right now.

Ace took another careful step forwards, and suddenly the world fell apart.

There was a low growl that left her looking left and right for glowing feline eyes, and something shifted underfoot. There was a rush of air and choking dust without warning. She could feel objects flying through the air around her, and then – suddenly –

a firm hand clutching the nape of her neck and jerking her backwards. She felt like a kitten, limp in its mother’s grasp as the floor, ceiling and walls all decide to swap locations for a while.

And all the time all she could think was; I knew it – there *is* something down here!

Eventually, the world settled back into floor, ceiling and walls. ‘That was close,’ she sighed, more to herself than anyone.

‘Closer than you think,’ intoned Lee behind her. ‘I’ve still got some dynamite in my pack. Any rocks damage that, and it could detonate.’

‘Wicked,’ sighed Ace.

Arabella the raven croaked quietly, and tried to duck her head under her wing. It seemed like the best response, under the circumstances. She could, she supposed, scream and caw, but no one would pay any attention. No one would hear her, over the explosions currently taking place. All she could do was try to make herself as small as possible, just in case any debris found its way in her direction. It was her lot; whenever people exploded, the fall-out always ended up ruffling her feathers, one way or the other.

People were exploding quite violently at the moment. Or at least, Wakeling was.



The afternoon had started to look up. After the fish had brought the girl struggling back, Wakeling's mood had seemed to brighten. Had Arabella been the kind of raven to care, she might have been troubled when she heard the professor tell his underlings to take the girl outside and give her a good scare. She wasn't the kind of raven to care, though; as long as she got her food and no one threw scientific instruments at her, she was generally happy. Of course, it might have been in her own best interests to intercede, considering that as soon as the girl escaped, the scientific instruments started flying in Arabella's direction again. Still, it was bearable, and after a few minutes Wakeling and the others left the room and everything settled back where it should be.

Even the girl didn't sneak down to try to annoy her by petting her thick black feathers. It could have been such a beautiful afternoon's sleep. If Wakeling hadn't come back, his fuse already burning and no sign of the girl. Then he'd gone upstairs, to the girl's room, and that was when it had happened.

'Where is she?'

It had been a long time coming. Ever since the morning, Arabella knew. She had been around Wakeling long enough to sense his moods. He was a slow burner, quiet and low most of the time, his voice barely ever making it above a whisper. But the annoyances were cumulative with him; each one pushed him higher and higher until there was nowhere to go but fury.

He was furious now.

'I said where is she?'

'I don't know,' the fish said. His voice was too calm to be soothing. Even Arabella could tell that, but no one ever asked her. 'Why not! If anything's happened to her...' words started to fail him, evaporating from his tongue under the heat of his anger. 'Stop gawping, Bernard! Take your misfits and find her!'

Bring her back, and bring her back happy and well or I'll...'

Wakeling didn't finish the sentence. He didn't need to; the other people had already left. Perhaps now would be a good time to try to soothe her keeper's nerves by showing off her trick, Arabella considered. Nothing would please Wakeling more than seeing just how clever his pet was, just how fine a workman he truly was.

‘Nevermore,’ croaked Arabella, and ducked as something small and metallic flew across the room.

Such was a raven’s lot.

The Doctor was nothing if not canny, Cole had to admit. It had only taken him a couple of minutes to realise that his musical abilities just weren’t doing the trick, and he’d changed track so fast you couldn’t even see the join. With a flick of the wrist, the

‘spoons’ had vanished and a bunch of paper flowers had grown up in their place. Sweetness was sitting with the flowers now, cast down on the table beside her whilst she sipped politely at her drink.

It hadn’t stopped at flowers, either. As the routine had gone on, stuffed toys, silk scarves, gold coins and even fire had all appeared out of or disappeared into various orifices. The little stranger – the little stranger who had been so sombre and solemn just a few moments ago – even managed to pull what looked like a live bat out of Sweetness’s left ear and juggle with it, a small ball and his chipped white mug of tea. The bat, it turned out, was actually some kind of synthetic; it was lying next to the flowers on the tabletop now.

The only thing that had let the Doctor down, in Cole’s opinion, was his banter. But that was only to be expected.

Every little trick he pulled off, every flick of the wrist and twist of reality, was accompanied by a constant stream of witticisms and songs all delivered in that chattering Scots lilt of his. If Cole hadn’t had other things on his mind, he might have been tempted to applaud. As it was, there was a hint of a smile on his face as he stood with his hands on the bar and watched.

Thick fingers even tapped along in time to the songs. He could tell, though, that the Doctor wasn’t happy; every word he said, every song, was designed to get the little girl to introduce herself, to speak, even if it was just to tell him to get lost.

Sweetness, however, didn’t say a word.

In the end, the Doctor had given up and, still smiling, pulled out a chair for the little girl to sit on. He’d asked Cole for something sweet and colourful for the two of them, and the barman had responded with two tall glasses of something pink which gripped the straws tightly and wouldn’t let them go. As Sweetness had quietly taken her glass, the Doctor had settled into the seat opposite her and dejectedly

sipped at his own drink.

‘Don’t take it too bad, Doctor,’ Cole had said gently.

‘Sweetness don’t talk to any of us round here.’

‘Sweetness?’ the Doctor said, looking to the little girl. She looked shyly up and then continued with her drink. ‘Is it a medical problem?’

‘Nah,’ Cole shook his head, trying not to sound too bitter as he said, ‘I just don’t think she’s got much to say to us.’

The Doctor looked at the little girl again, watching the lazy afternoon light dancing in her loose ginger curls. Sweetness didn’t look back at him, instead she was glancing all around the bar again, her thin lips still sucking in the pink juice. The Doctor didn’t follow her eyes, but Cole did; he could see she was watching the Fussies as they worked their way around the bar, eating the red dust like she was drinking her drink.

‘Not much of a talker, Sweetness?’ the Doctor asked, and she gave him an odd look. ‘No, I suppose not.’

But Cole wasn’t looking at the little girl any more, nor the Doctor. His dark eyes had been drawn to the corners of the room, where the shadows were writhing and multiplying. The Fussies weren’t cleaning, he realised with a start, they were gathering. There were at least ten of the dusty red bricks shivering in the corners of the bar, and still more were appearing. A couple of the braver ones were starting to edge towards the Doctor’s table; perhaps they felt safer advancing on him as he had his back to them. Cole tried not to give a cry as he realised a couple of the robots were looking at him with softly glowing eyes.

‘Doctor,’ he said, his accent growing stronger as his heart beat faster.

The Doctor turned to look at him, and then followed his eyes until he too spotted the Fussies’ advance. He raised two dark eyebrows, his grey eyes wide with curiosity.

‘Interesting,’ was all he would say.

Still the Fussies crept closer. Cole was almost ashamed to admit the pang of relief he felt when he realised that the little robots were ignoring him, and edging towards the Doctor’s table. Neither the Doctor nor Sweetness seemed overly concerned, the little girl finishing

her drink, the little stranger turning in his chair to watch them approach. And approach they did; within moments of Cole first spotting them, the outermost robots were already brushing feelers against the Doctor's piebald shoes. The little stranger just reached down with lined fingers to stroke between the antennae.

'Are you sure that's right?' Cole asked, his wide shoulders beginning to tense.

Was he getting ready to fight, or flee, he asked himself.

One of the Fussies gave a twist of its rigid body and somehow ended up on the Doctor's lap.

'It's alright,' the Doctor said softly, and it took Cole a moment to realise he was talking to him and not Sweetness.

'They're friends of a friend of mine.'

Cole didn't say a word; he didn't have time.

As if gaining courage from the first Fussies' success, the other robots swarmed forwards, their motors whining. One after the other they twisted and leapt and climbed, some clinging on to the Doctor's back with their underbellies, others landing on the tabletop between him and Sweetness. It only took them a few moments, and they were all over him – at least twenty of them, possibly every Fussy on Heritage. They sat on his shoulders, his lap, his back, his arms and his legs, each of them humming madly to each other.

'Don't worry,' the Doctor replied, his voice muffled but calm.

Amusingly calm; Sweetness giggled then.

Cole didn't really feel like giggling.

'I've never seen them act like this,' he said urgently, still trying to decide whether if he rushed out to brush them away they'd just limpet onto him instead.

'I think they trust me,' was the Doctor's reply.

One of the Fussies dropped from the Doctor's left arm as he tried to place his drink gently back down on the table. It rolled over in one fluid motion and scuttled across the tabletop to regard Sweetness with two glowing eyes. Except they weren't eyes, Cole chided himself, they

were sensors. No, damn it. He shook his head; if they were going to start acting like weird creatures, he was going to think of them like that. Glowing eyes, sucking mouths and wagging antennae all.

‘More like they want something,’ Cole muttered, reaching for a broom as he came to a decision.

Sweetness reached out a pale hand and tickled the tabletop Fussy under the chin. Diodes. Whatever. She was touching it, anyway.

‘Do you think?’ came the Doctor’s voice from under the pile of Fusses.

Cole decided it was time he acted, before his nerve gave out on him for good. Scooping the broom handle up in one thick hand, he hefted his bulky frame up onto the bar with the other.

For a man of his size, he moved with great agility, crouched low and glaring with hazel brown eyes. With his shorn head and slanted eyes, he looked for all the world like one of the great Inuit fishermen, his broom a spear ready to slice through the flesh of some unwitting prey.

‘Get out of it, you buggers,’ was the best he could do for a battle cry. It didn’t seem to matter all that much.

The thin end of his broom twitched through the air, stitching invisible patterns into the bar’s atmosphere. Each time it lunged forwards, it struck the metal hide of a Fussy with a dull thud. Each Fussy it struck twisted in surprise, lost its grip on the Doctor’s clothes and fell to the floor with a thunk. The broom handle didn’t even leave a mark on their thick skins, but they hurried away as if afraid nonetheless. Cole couldn’t help feeling quite proud of himself, the defender of strangers and small helpless children.

Then he remembered that he was only protecting them from a bunch of uppity vacuum cleaners, and he didn’t feel quite so proud.

Still he kept on striking them, and within moments there wasn’t a Fussy left clinging to either brown jacket, dark hair or check trousers. Each of them sped away, melting into the walls in that eerie way they had. It made his bones shiver, just watching it. But at least they were all gone now, except the large one sitting in the middle of the table, still getting its head scratched by little Sweetness. Cole might have felt a little more comfortable in his role as saviour if either of the people he’d saved looked just a little Re they were bothered one way or the other.

The Doctor was just staring straight ahead, a strange look on his face.

‘I think perhaps you were right,’ the Doctor muttered softly, and Cole realised he was speaking to him. ‘Or we were both right. I think they trusted me to do something.’

Staring straight ahead.

‘I think I’ve made a grave error,’ the Doctor said.

Straight ahead into Sweetness’s perfect blue eyes.

‘A very grave error,’ he said.

## Chapter Seventeen

6. August, 6048 CE

16:18

*‘I’ve been lucky, I guess you might say. I’ve had three fathers where most only have one. Some would say I was careless; to lose one father and so on.*

*But I only lost one, really. The other two I chose to leave behind.’*

Sweetness Cole,

in ‘*First of a New Breed*’

her autobiography.

Somehow, Bernard instinctively knew where he had to go. Even as Wakeling yelled at him – burning with that red-faced fury that he had only seen once before – his mind was ticking over and coming to the only conclusion. Sweetness hadn’t just wandered off on her own. Oh no, that was too simple. Things didn’t work like that, and besides she was only a kid – she was more terrified of Wakeling than he was. No, she’d been taken. And there was only one person on Heritage who had the nerve to oppose Bernard, or the desire to upset Wakeling.

The Doctor.

Once his mind had drawn that conclusion, it was obvious where they had to go. As they scuttled out of Wakeling’s front room – leaving the scientist to vent his rage on that dumb bird of his – Bernard gathered his forces around him and strode down the main street, triumphant.

He was proud of himself.; the keen intellect of man was what set him aside from the animals.

He cast a glance sideways at Ed's expectant but confused face, the stetson on his head pressing the lank locks at the back of his head slickly down to his neck. Well, keen intellect separated *most* men from the animals. Others got along by dint of an opposable thumb.

At the end of the street, the fat and bloated sun was just beginning to sink below the horizon, having gorged itself on daylight until there was little left to fill the sky. It wasn't exactly the traditional high noon, but Bernard supposed it was the next best thing. A quick glance up at the empty windows on either side, knowing that those who weren't out growing crops would be looking down on him and trembling, and then Bernard set his face into what he hoped would be read as a grim expression and willed his walker on through the wooden doors. They cracked against his metal skeleton, and swung behind him into Ed and Christa's waiting hands. They moved in beside him, expressionless, awaiting his instructions. For all their faults, they were good and loyal soldiers.

It took him a few moments to read the scene in front of him when he entered the bar. There was Sweetness, all innocence with her back to him as she sipped on some foul-looking cocktail. And there was the Doctor – as predicted – sitting in front of her, staring at her, trying to infect her obedience through the power of his will alone. Stood over them, covering them with the business end of a seldom used broom, was the fat barman. At least some people could still be counted on for their loyalty.

Bernard clicked his teeth, and all eyes were on him.

'Alright,' his cool voice announced. 'We'll take it from here.'

Cole looked down at the broom with those slanted eyes of his as if he'd forgotten why it was there, and then obediently backed away. Back behind his bar where he belonged.

'Bernard,' the Doctor growled grimly.

For a moment, Bernard hesitated.

There was something new here, something different, something that was just out of the corner of his eye. The Doctor had a look to him, a firmness about his jaw, that the dolphin hadn't seen before. Not even after Bernard's first failed warning, up in the stranger's room. The

Doctor he'd faced then, he'd been weak, trying his best to appear resolute and dangerous but without any of the desire – the *balls* – to back it up. Bernard hadn't seen it at the time, because he didn't have this Doctor to compare it to. Now – looking into those cold, grey eyes –

Bernard knew he had come up against a man who was determined, a man who would do anything to make things work out to his satisfaction.

Bernard tried to tell himself it was like looking in a mirror.

No matter. Whatever the Doctor believed he was, he wasn't Wakeling. He wasn't a man who held the future of Heritage in his delicate hands. He was just one man, and whilst one man could give Heritage its future back, one man would never be allowed to snatch it away from them. There were too many others here, too many people like Bernard working against him.

Working to save everything they'd tried so hard to build up. And if they pulled a little aside for themselves, well...everyone deserved a reward. There would be enough, eventually.

'I see you've met Sweetness,' Bernard breathed. He couldn't catch the nuances in his English speaking voice – the translator that constantly reminded him of his curse, his genetic misfortune, couldn't convey such subtleties – but he knew his voice must sound threatening and low. 'Why don't you let us take care of her now?'

Christa took a step forward, and pulled the unresisting girl out of her chair. She pulled her in tight to her thin black dress, a pale arm falling protectively across the girl's chest. Sweetness didn't say a word, just accepted the woman's protection with wordless complicity. Ed moved up behind her, his thin fingers drifting to Christa's waist, the image of the happy family; shorn-headed father, raven-haired mother, curled redhead daughter.

They were pretty as a picture.

The Doctor rose slowly out of his seat as Sweetness moved away.

Cole's eyes skitted onto the mirror; what was he looking for there, Bernard wondered.

'She's a remarkable girl,' the Doctor said. 'Yours?'



Bernard couldn't help baring his teeth; it was instinct.

'Perhaps you'd like to come and speak to her father?'

Bernard suggested, praying that the Doctor heard the oceans of meaning in his voice, as Bernard did in his. 'He can thank you for taking such good care of her.'

'I'd like to meet her parents, yes,' the Doctor agreed softly, his eyes narrowing.

No one else in the bar dared move, the atmosphere so charged they feared grounding it through their own feeble bodies. Only those with wills of iron to ground them dared speak, those such as the Doctor, and Bernard.

Bernard suddenly realised that the Doctor wasn't even looking at him any more. His eyes had wandered to the doorway, perhaps even out into the street.

Bernard cursed the fact that he couldn't just give a quick glance over his shoulder, and willed his walker to take a step sideways so that he could see what was more important than this epic confrontation. There was nothing. Nothing but the red dust, and the setting sun. Just past the entrance, Bernard could see that idiot Sheriff pulling himself unsteadily onto a horse before urging it out of town with a click of his heels, but beside that nothing. It had all been a trick, obviously, to break Bernard's concentration. He cursed himself for falling for it; turning back to the Doctor, he could see a look of disappointment in the little man's eyes. Obviously he was upset that an adversary of Bernard's quality had fallen for such a cheap trick.

'Come on,' Bernard snapped to hide his embarrassment.

'Professor Wakeling will be waiting.'

Shaking his head, the Doctor walked out of the bar, Ed and Christa at first parting to clear his way, then following behind him. Bernard watched the little man's retreated back and tried to think of a way to regain the upper hand. Nothing sprang very easily to mind.

With a muttered curse, he glanced over at Cole. The barman was stood at the far corner of the bar, staring into the mirror at himself. No, not at himself; the mirror had dissolved, and a view-screen appeared in its place. The dark-haired man stabbed out at a button with a fat finger, and then caught Bernard's eye.

At least some people could be trusted to do as they were told.

Still, it wouldn't hurt to keep him on his toes.

'Wakeling wants that conference to go smoothly,' Bernard snapped gruffly. 'Make sure he doesn't lose any of the signals, or he'll be talking to you about it. Or I will.'

Cole nearly jumped out of his skin, and his fingers suddenly started dancing all over the viewscreen at a far more energetic pace.

'Aye, right,' he burred. 'Of course.'

It was good to know there were still some who held him in awe. Pleased with himself, Bernard strode out of the swing doors, after his underlings and prisoner.

Cole remained, arranging Wakeling's conference.

Ace pulled herself forward, thankful at least that now she could stand upright as she trudged on. The phosphorescent light was back now, but intermittently. It made her feel like she was walking through Soho, painfully underage as the neon signs swam up and away, one after the other. There, as here, she was always gripped by the deep suspicion that something would crawl out of the darkness and latch itself onto her. At least if she was in Soho, the most she'd have to fear would be a horny but drunken businessman. Here it could be anything.

Lee stumbled on behind her, but he was lost to his own thoughts. She could tell without looking at him that he was starting to question why he was there. If he asked, would she be able to give him a decent answer? Or would she just say 'because the Doctor told us to' and hope that because it had been right before, it would be now?

Instead, she asked:

'Why did you stay on Heritage? You must've had a chance to leave.'

She could hear him behind her, staring off into the darkness and seeing some other day.

'Because I deserve Heritage,' he answered flatly.

Ask a stupid question, Ace thought, and forced herself onwards, in silence.

The front room of Wakeling's little shack, his little wood-effect home, was all wires and bustle. Nearly every trace of furniture had been moved out of the front room, and replaced with a tangle of wires and tiny little cameras, which were focused on the empty centre of the room. Wakeling fussed and fiddled with the wires, feeding them all into a box the size of his head that rested neatly out of sight in the other room. An intermittently flashing light was the only sign that the signal the box was transmitting was being received clearly by the equipment in Cole's bar.

There was no video receiver in Wakeling's front room –

there was, in fact, only one on the whole of Heritage, the one that had been the first piece of technology vulcanised from the colonists' ship when they'd arrived. The first, but not the last.

Wakeling still had his ways of keeping in touch with the bar, however; a small microphone hung from the ceiling in the middle of the room and two speakers rested just beside the junction box. Wakeling had made both himself, in preparation for this day. He was trying very hard not to think that he was going to spread word of the greatest scientific achievement of the century by tying two tin cans together with a long piece of twine and shouting.

'Can you hear me, Cole?' Wakeling asked, a nervous hand finding its way into his neat hair.

'I can hear you, Professor,' Cole's Geordie twang crackled out of the makeshift speakers.

'Please make sure the link remains stable,' Wakeling said. 'I'll need all the resources you have for off-planet calls.'

There was a silence then, and Wakeling looked into one of the cameras pointedly. He knew that Cole could see him. He knew he didn't have time for any delays.

'Unless you think it's not worth the effort, Mr Cole?'

Cole answered then, hurried and nervous; the same Cole as always.

'No, Professor. You'll get your call.' Another pause, then,

'Good luck with it.'

If you'd asked Wakeling as late as yesterday how he'd be feeling on

the brink of his big moment, he probably would have told you that he was quietly confident. He would have been lying, of course; he knew he had a lot of hard work shifting fixed ideas to do, not least of which was trying to convince the scientific community that the Holy Grail had been found on a dusty backwater like Heritage. Still, if he'd been honest, he would have told you that he was nervous, but that he was reasonably certain that things would go his way.

If you'd have asked as late as yesterday, he certainly wouldn't have said that he'd be suffering from crippling panic that the whole thing would come crumbling down around his eyes so much that he'd need to fiddle around doing make-do work just to keep himself from screaming.

Of course, yesterday there hadn't been anybody called the Doctor on the planet.

There was a knock on the door, a gentle tap-tapping. Either Bernard had suddenly developed manners after several million years of evolution, or else he was nervous about what mood he would find Wakeling in. Let him worry; his black mood was down to the dolphin anyway.

Wakeling pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose with a finger, and ran a comb through his already neat hair. He plucked a few invisible pieces of fluff from his waistcoat before picking up a dark jacket from a hanger by the door. He pulled it on slowly, smoothing out the creases with his hands, feeling the velvet resist his touch. The jacket was dark and neatly tailored, perfectly suited to his dark trousers. A better jacket couldn't be found in the galaxy's finest boutiques. Did it matter that the style was a few decades out of fashion? A suit such as this was a classic, carefully packed away and transported across the universe with him for the day that he would arrive on Heritage.

Today, in fact.

'Come,' Wakeling called, his voice clear and steady.

The door opened slowly, and Bernard's walker creaked him slowly into the room, his eyes dark and nervous. His blowhole opened and closed sporadically, gasping – Wakeling knew – for the soothing presence of a cigarette. Wakeling had banned the dolphin from smoking in the house, out of concern for Sweetness's health; Bernard was too much in awe of the professor to disobey any of his

instructions, and so he was forced to ride out the nicotine craving. Wakeling gave a cold smile.

‘Bernard. Have you found her?’

Bernard didn’t say a word, but from behind his silver walker appeared a desultory little figure, her face long and hiding behind bouncing red curls.

‘Sweetness,’ Wakeling said kindly. She didn’t look at him, obviously swimming with guilt. Ashamed of her past actions, wishing she could erase them. ‘You shouldn’t run off. I was worried. Anything could have happened to you.’

She shuffled slightly, and found the tips of her toes suddenly the most interesting thing in the whole universe. Wakeling smiled paternally, and patted her softly on the head.

Three more figures stepped in from the dusty outside; the little stranger, with Ed and Christa standing behind him, blocking his retreat.

The smile froze on Wakeling’s face.

‘Sweetness, why don’t you go upstairs and play with Ed and Christa until Daddy’s ready for you?’ he said, his brown eyes fixed on the Doctor’s. ‘I’d like to have a few words with your new friend.’

Ed and Christa looked at each other awkwardly; obviously they had other plans for the evening that didn’t involve babysitting. Well, that wasn’t any of Wakeling’s concern – they would do as they were told, or Bernard would have to have words, no matter what fondness he might have for them.

‘Go and play with her,’ Wakeling said firmly. ‘And play nicely.’

The couple looked at each other again, and Ed reached out and put a hand on Sweetness’s shoulder. The little girl didn’t react at all, just allowed herself to be guided through the room and up the stairs in the corner.

‘Such a sweet couple,’ the Doctor observed dryly. ‘I assume you checked their references thoroughly before taking them on as childminders?’

Bernard swiped at the little stranger with his tail, but the Doctor

neatly side-stepped it, instead walking further into the room on the pretence of examining the web of cameras enmeshing the room. Wakeling didn't allow himself to be drawn, and gave Bernard a disapproving look that held obvious meaning: not in my home.

'Ed and Christa have their faults, I admit,' he said, leaning in to snatch one of the miniature cameras from the Doctor's curious grasp. 'But like everyone on Heritage, they care about what happens to Sweetness. She was the last child born here, did you know that? In many ways, she's the daughter of the whole town. And at least Ed and Christa wouldn't encourage her to run away from her father and get into goddess knows what mischief.'

The Doctor gave Wakeling an infuriating grin, and doffed his hat to one of the cameras.

'Are these transmitting?' he asked, completely ignoring the scientist's barbs. 'Am I on television?'

'Please don't touch them, Doctor. They're part of a very delicate set-up,' Wakeling warned.

The Doctor ignored him, his fingers and eyes still darting about over the equipment. Wakeling stepped forward and batted the little man's hands away firmly, fixing him with a burning glare. The Doctor looked up into his eyes. No, *through* his eyes and into his very soul. Wakeling opened his eyes wide and let the little stranger look; such an ignorant imp of a man wouldn't better him. Let him look. Let him know who he was dealing with.

'I said don't touch,' he snarled. 'Please.'

The Doctor nodded slightly, a brief agreement, understanding reached.

'It must be important,' the little man said, an expansive hand covering the whole set-up. 'Whatever all this is for.'

'It's the most important thing in the universe, the professor answered honestly. 'It's giving Heritage back its future.'

The Doctor nodded again, turning his back on Wakeling.

Bernard gave the professor a glance, but Wakeling didn't have the inclination to translate it into human. The dolphin would stay put until he was told to do otherwise. Or risk the future moving on without him.

‘It’s not the future I’m here to talk about, Professor Wakeling,’ the Doctor announced spinning around on his umbrella tip, his eyes cool and sharp. ‘It’s the past.’

This time it was Wakeling’s turn to nod.

‘I thought as much,’ he said calmly. ‘Somebody’s been telling tall tales about Heritage, and you’ve been sent to investigate them, haven’t you. What are you, an Adjudicator?’

‘What do you think?’ the Doctor asked, raising an eyebrow.

‘An Adjudicator then.’

‘If I was, would I tell you, do you think?’ the Doctor asked enigmatically.

Wakeling nodded slowly, his worst fears confirmed.

Somehow, the knowledge was liberating. At least now he knew exactly what he was up against. Who he had to make his case to.

Or tell a more convincing tale to, later.

‘I’m afraid you’ve had a wasted journey, Doctor,’ Wakeling announced, his new-found calmness seeping out of every pore of his body. It was only a matter of minutes now; he didn’t even have to stop the Doctor, just delay him. After that, let those with foresight make up their own minds. ‘I’m on the verge of something important here. Something so important that certain unscrupulous, less inspired individuals would stop at nothing to discredit my work. Or if not that, then myself. You’d serve the universe far better if you stopped wasting your efforts chasing after these ridiculous phantom slurs, and hunted out the real culprits. Those that breathed them into your ear.’

The Doctor didn’t look up, instead examined the handle of his umbrella. The red was scratched and chipped here and there, the fabric of the umbrella itself torn and tattered. If he had been sent by the Adjudicators, then he couldn’t be their most prized investigator. Perhaps they had already caught wind of something in the air, and sent their dullest and worst to bring the matter to a close without blowing away the dust too much. If he *had* been sent by the Adjudicators.

‘So there’s no truth in my suspicions,’ the Doctor asked dully, a rather slow pupil seeking the teacher’s approval on even the simplest of

questions.

‘None,’ Wakeling agreed, his mind already on the events to come.

The Doctor looked up, something sparking in his crystal-grey eyes. Cold glass fashioned so effectively, they looked real.

Except they lacked the warmth of real human eyes.

‘And I suppose you can give me the Heyworths’ new address so that they can confirm that for me?’ he breathed softly, the words chilling the scorched air.

Wakeling’s eyes half-closed into a scowl, safe behind his glasses.

‘Perhaps I haven’t made myself clear,’ he said softly. ‘I don’t have to do anything for you. To be frank, you’re lucky I’m even bothering to speak with you. I’m not accountable to you. Maybe I once was, but not any more. Now the things I have done here, the choices I have made, will be judged in a higher court than you have access to. History.’

Wakeling looked down at the little man then, making full use of the one or two feet he had over him. He looked down his nose, from behind thin glasses. Who was this man? What power did he have over Wakeling? None, of course. None.

‘That’s very interesting, Professor,’ the Doctor said mildly, drawing himself up to his full height. He was still a good foot too short for a nose-to-nose confrontation. ‘But I’m something of an expert on history. You’re right; sometimes she does have a terrible memory. She can forget seemingly the most important things. But sometimes, sometimes Professor, all that matters is that on the Adobe Flats there is a grave, next to the ruin of a home. Sometimes all that history remembers is where the bodies are buried.’

Wakeling felt a pang of something shivering down his spine.

If he concentrated hard enough, he might even be able to convince himself it was nerves about his big day. It hit his stomach all in one go, making him feel sick immediately.

Yes, definitely nerves.

‘I’m getting tired of this,’ Wakeling snapped, turning away from those piercing eyes. If he held onto the anger, let it grow, perhaps it would



eat away that other feeling. Perhaps it would leave him feeling mercifully empty. 'I've told you before; Ben Heyworth got sick of living here and took his wife to Sale. For all I know, they're still there. After he left, a few of our children got a bit too adventurous and managed to burn the farm down.

But Sheriff found them out. They've learnt their lesson.'

'And the grave?' the Doctor asked, his quiet voice insistently needling into Wakeling's head, touching his weakest spots, making them sting.

Wakeling didn't want to think about the grave.

'Heyworth had a horse,' came Bernard's ersatz cultured voice from the doorway. He was affecting to lean casually against the frame, but his walker wasn't too comfortable with the instability of his position. It fought him all the way. 'It broke its leg just before they moved away. He loved that horse.'

Wakeling had never been so pleased to hear Bernard speak in all the years he'd known the dolphin. Perhaps he would have given him a warm smile – perhaps the first ever – to show his appreciation, but the Doctor was still in front of him. Still holding him rigid with two cold eyes, cataloguing every reaction, no matter how minute. Looking for the chinks in his silver armour. Well, Wakeling wouldn't give him the satisfaction. He held onto his anger tightly, clenched into it with his nails, just to aggravate it. It flared accommodatingly.

The Doctor looked up at him, his face a mask.

'And I suppose they asked you to take care of their daughter for them,' he asked, darkly.

And Wakeling's anger withered and died, leaving behind it only ice.

Bernard caught the professor's eye, his expression too alien to read. Something in the way he stood straighter, the silvered muzzles of his pistols catching the sun's dying light, made Wakeling remember his flippant answer earlier in the day. What if he found out Sweetness was Heyworth's child? So now he had found out. What exactly *would* happen to him? For just a moment, Wakeling wished it was up to somebody else to decide.

'Bernard, why don't you take the Doctor back to his hotel room?' the professor heard his own voice calmly saying. 'He can wait for his shuttle there.'

Bernard took a step into the room, his glistening teeth suddenly bursting to get out of his mouth and taste the air. The Doctor didn't even look in the dolphin's direction. Instead, he kept his eyes on Wakeling, and slowly nodded. He raised his hat in good-bye, and paced over to the doorway still without a word.

Bernard stood aside to allow him to leave, but not without letting one of the walker's legs brush against the Doctor's body.

Just to let him know he was only inches away.

The Doctor stopped, and turned back.

Wakeling found he was holding his breath, but couldn't for the life of him make himself take a fresh gulp of air. His lungs had frozen; the Doctor's eyes, his fingers, must have reached into them and held them immobile. Now he would just wait for Wakeling to suffocate, there in his own home. On the day that was meant to be his greatest triumph.

'In my experience,' he said nonchalantly, 'anybody who willingly gives themselves up to history's judgement usually does so because they're too frightened to take a good look and judge themselves. Anybody with a modicum of self worth is terrified of how history will see them. And rightly so; it's rarely how they see themselves.'

And with that, the Doctor raised his hat again and left, Bernard his shadow.

Leaving Wakeling on his own with his anger, his coldness, and his fears.

## Chapter Eighteen

6. August, 6048 CE

16:45

Ace wiped a hand across her forehead, and tried not to think about the thick grime and God knew what else she must have transferred there from the mine walls, floor and ceiling. She also tried not to think about how long she'd been crawling through the dark veins, and wondering just how long it had taken the Doctor to find his way out. Lee had led them down a wrong turning a few forks back, and they had lost a lot of time just trying to find their way back to where they should be. Still, she couldn't help thinking they should be making better time. It was as if the tunnels were moving about on their own,

just to confuse them both.

There was something in Ace, some animal part, that didn't like being trapped in the dark. It longed to be free, out on the savannah chasing down some prey until she could taste its blood in her mouth. It made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end, being down in the mines with only the pale glow of the luminous walls to see by. Feeling everything so close around her and only a damp scent in her nose. It made her feel like she was being watched, constantly.

She tried to concentrate on the Doctor. The sound of his singing voice. The rattle of those spoons that he dug out infrequently, when he thought he could get away with it. The grin of self-confidence as he announced that cooking was a precise science, only to see his soufflé collapse the second he slid it out of the oven.

It did her good to remember he wasn't perfect.

Lee crept up behind her. Ace was so tense, she nearly broke his arm as he placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. Luckily for him, she caught herself in time.

'There,' he intoned, his deep voice echoing eerily in the mine. Ace looked where he was pointing. Up ahead, the tight mine seemed to open out into a broader cavern, and the pale glow all but disappeared as the walls drew out. But it was replaced by another light, this was harsher and more sterile. It was artificial, and it glinted dully off metal surfaces, tarnished by years of damp and dust. Here and there, she could make out what looked like houses, tiny houses like those she'd seen on her one trip to Gulliver's Kingdom when she was younger. She hadn't liked it, the small houses looking creepy, making her feel hopelessly out of place. She didn't like this underground city for midgets much now, either.

In the half-light, Ace could make out the glowing eyes of the Fussies.

Watching them.

As Bernard strode down the road, he felt sure he could feel the proud eyes of the whole town on him. He could see the curtain covering Wakeling's second floor window twitching. Either Ed or Christa had their eyes on him, at least, and knew what was coming. The rest watched him too, watched him march the stranger back towards Cole's. Watched as he took firm and decisive action against the danger that threatened to destroy everything they'd fought to keep alive. To shake the deep foundations that Bernard had built his elevated

position on.

Wakeling might be the colony's saviour, but there couldn't be a single soul watching now who couldn't see that Bernard was Wakeling's saviour. The dolphin let his chest swell as he walked.

The bars of his walker closed in uncomfortably, but Bernard knew it was a small price to pay for looking every inch the big man.

If only the Doctor had looked a little more nervous, it might have made things perfect.

The little man was strolling casually in front of Bernard, not even having the decency to try and make a run for it. I mean, if he did he might get a good few yards before the dolphin's razor quick reactions sent two bullets chasing after him. Or perhaps the stranger could turn around and try to overpower him, struggling against the unstoppable might of Bernard and his walker and forcing him to put an end to it right here, with the whole town watching. But no, he just whistled on towards Cole's, swinging that umbrella back and forth with each step. He didn't even try to get out of the line of fire.

The Doctor noticed one of the curtains along the way twitch, and raised his hat politely, grinning broadly. Bernard gave a low rumble, which his translator failed to pick up.

'You really should consider your position,' the Doctor was prattling as he walked, his conversation floating back over his shoulder as he walked. He couldn't even look Bernard in the eyes as he begged for his life. 'Your friend Professor Wakeling is a very determined man. He won't let anything get in his way.'

Bernard snorted, air hissing out of his blowhole.

'Isn't that what I should be saying?' his synthesised voice announced, without a trace of the laugh.

'Eventually,' the Doctor carried on regardless, 'he's going to realise that he can't afford any witnesses to what happened here.'

It's too dangerous; any one of them could break under the right kind of questioning. The more he relies on you now, the more certain he is to get rid of you, later.'

'Just keep walking,' the dolphin growled, pushing the Doctor forwards with his bottlenose.

The Doctor shrugged and kept walking. Again, Bernard couldn't help but wish for a more dramatic reaction to his threatening presence. Perhaps he could just wing him out in the street, just enough to let everyone draw their own conclusions and put the required amount of fear into the stranger. Perhaps blow a kneecap off. After all, he only needed the one to walk to Cole's, didn't he? Not for the first time, Bernard found his knowledge of human anatomy lacking. Such a shame – it had been his favourite subject back in school. Far more exciting than the dull Cetacean History lessons. 1066CE – we played and danced a bit in the ocean. 1996CE – somebody threw us a fish.

We ate it. Big contribution to world history.

Cole's double doors loomed up, and the Doctor paused outside, turning back to Bernard.

'Well, thank you very much for the company,' he said jovially. 'I think I can find my own way from here.'

Bernard didn't say a word, just motioned forwards with his walker.

'Well, if you insist,' shrugged the Doctor.

Moving into the bar, Bernard was struck by the silence of the place. Nothing moved; no Fussies leapt between the tables, fighting to be the first to inhale the thin red dust; no people swayed this way and that, seesawing to the bar to get the best out of their end of the deal. Cole usually exchanged their favours for as much alcohol as they could drink, but still no one had ever drunk so much that they felt they'd got the better of Cole. Well, maybe Sheriff, but he had another price to pay and his receipt was written in the broken veins in his nose and face.

Looking around, Bernard couldn't see Sheriff or Cole. Both had probably disappeared to cower under their stones, terrified of what was going on around them, and leaving it up to someone else to clear away the mess.

In the corner of the mirror, a viewscreen flicked. Squinting, Bernard could see Wakeling sitting on the floor in his home.

Awaiting the moment, peacefully. Bernard had never seen the viewscreen before, but then he had never really taken much of an interest in what the others did. When everyone else had been crowded into Cole's listening to the company decision on the mining operation, Bernard had been out shooting cans in the desert. His walker wasn't

nimble enough for him to work the mines like the others. If he was honest, he didn't really care for the mining lifestyle at all. That wasn't what had attracted him to Heritage, what had made him sell up and sign up as soon as he'd read the brochure.

No, for Bernard the selling point was that the mines were possibly as far away from the sea as he could ever get without becoming a pilot. Deep down inside, perhaps he thought that if he forced himself to live like a human, his misshapen body would slowly become like a human's. Tall and slender, and dextrous.

'You don't have to do this,' the Doctor said, his eyes dark under the brim of his hat. He made it sound like a threat.

Pathetic. Humanity was wasted on some people.

'Upstairs,' Bernard said, angry at his own voice for not carrying his disgust along with the words. 'Now.'

The Doctor didn't say another word, didn't even shrug. He just paced slowly across the room towards the stairs, the tip of his umbrella marking time on the plasticrete floors. Tap-tip tap-tap tip-tap. Bernard scowled; there was something in just that sound that was churlish, insolent, unafraid. He followed close behind the little man, all too aware of the grind, the hiss, the clawing scratch his walker's legs made with each step. Nothing as smooth, as fluid, as controlled as that tap-tip tap-tap tip-tap. He disgusted himself.

As the Doctor mounted the stairs, Bernard hung back. He wasn't giving the Doctor room to breathe, and he certainly didn't expect him to attack. He was simply acutely aware of how unstable his walker was once it started climbing. If the Doctor did suddenly realise that his umbrella might make more use as a weapon rather than a walking stick, he wanted to have room to get in a good two shots before he toppled. He already had his spots picked out; left and right, one through either lung, leaving his victim gasping for air he just couldn't hold.

Clunk, hiss, scratch, went the walker as it climbed the stairs.

Something moved, and Bernard sent the mental twitch to fire his guns.

It happened just too late, as the broom handle struck him a good blow right across the side of the face, sending him falling backwards as he lost control. The two bullets flew aimlessly high, splintering into the ceiling as the world started to flip end over end. The walker's frame

took most of the beating, but a few stairs managed to add insult to injury as they connected with his soft grey flesh, each sending sparks dancing across his vision. He could hear the grind and howl as the fall bent his walker into a new position, and he briefly wondered whether it would ever walk again.

‘And if you weren’t a fish, I’d gut you,’ Bernard heard Cole spit angrily, before blackness claimed him.

The sun was almost gone now, leaving nothing but dark and cold to claim Heritage’s dusty wastes. It dipped behind the horizon sullenly, without comment, as it had so many times before. It was finally disgusted with them, had wallowed in their filth for all it could bear in one day, and it slunk away with the veiled threat that it might not return. It always had before –

relenting after nights so cold perhaps it thought the sin would freeze out of them – but there was nothing to say that it would again. Maybe tomorrow would be the day they finally all woke to a sunless sky, and realised they were living in Hell.

At least Sheriff could say he was there when it finally vanished, as he had been so many nights before, clinging to the last shred of light like a frightened child. By his side was his newly found bottle of vodka, rescued from its hiding place inside his desk, for when he finally decided he could no longer bear remembering and craved oblivion again. By his other side, there was a small but heavy instrument, rusty through years of neglect.

Discoloured with something more than simple corrosion, perhaps.

If you could have seen him there, you might have taken him for something else. A tree, perhaps. A shrub or a rock.

Something that had been there longer than a few hours, definitely. Something that had been there so long it had grown roots and settled, comfortable with its chosen home. Sheriff had settled there – the way he settled there most nights – but he was anything but comfortable. Most people took him for a drunk.

They thought he came out here to drink, to pass out when he had had too much and to wake up the morning and scuttle home hoping no one saw him. Most people took him that way. Sheriff knew different.

He wasn’t a drunk. He didn’t even like the drink. He didn’t come out here to gorge himself out of the public eye; everyone knew what he

was, so why bother to hide it from them? No, he wasn't a drunk, not really, despite his bloodshot eyes and veiny dry skin. He was a conscience, a conscience for the whole town, and he came out here to remind himself. And after he had done that, he needed the drink to allow him to look them in the eyes as he scuttled back home. He needed the drink.

Tonight he had brought something else. Tonight he had company – Wakeling's instrument, fresh from its shallow grave, resurrected to haunt him – and tonight he couldn't bear to be alone with his memories. Tonight he needed something else, something stronger than the harsh vodka, something that might black out his thoughts for good.

The pistol was cold metal, pressed tight against his ample belly, almost nestled within its warm folds. It was neat and compact, perhaps a little rusty around the edges, but what could you expect? It was an antique, a memento of a territorial dispute a long way away from Heritage, back before Sheriff gave up his name. Military issue, automatic loading, semi-automatic percussive projectile weaponry, hugging his gut, cold, heavy and dead. In Sheriff's youth – how long ago now? – lasers and heat rays had been all the rage. But when he was fighting, they had reverted to projectile weapons – perhaps the oldest weapons known to man. There had been a decision, somewhere; lasers and heat rays cauterised whatever wounds they caused instantly, injuring yes but killing less often. Old fashioned bullets tore flesh to ribbons and left it bleeding. Even winging your target might kill them.

Sheriff shook his head sadly. He reached out for the bottle, but his fingers only caressed the seal, didn't open. If you watched him then, eyes squinted half-closed against the burning sunset, you might have wondered what he was doing, what he was thinking. You might wonder, but you would never know; his puffy red face was stern but unreadable, no trace of the oceans inside him, just the burning red face of the desert sands.

So Sheriff sat, alone with his memories, looking down at the shell of the Heyworth farm.

In that moment, his thoughts were his own.

Lee looked over at Ace, wondering if she could read the fear in his eyes. She looked back, mud streaked in a broad stripe across her nose, and flashed him a grin. Perhaps she thought it was encouraging, even



friendly. To Lee, it looked like a predator flashing its teeth before diving in for the kill. He could almost feel her sharp teeth closing around his throat.

She pulled another of the lengths of wire that the Doctor had given to her from her bag and bit away the plastic at either end. Dull copper wiring was revealed, barely shining in the phosphorescent light. Lee tried to remember how long it had been since he had even heard of anyone using copper wiring. He couldn't remember. Somehow it didn't seem important. This was the last connection, the last thin strand in the complex web the Doctor had instructed them to build. Components at either end of the Fussies' town were all wired in to this one point; the dull metal two-way speaker that had somehow found its way down here from the colony ship.

If Ace managed to connect that wire without any problems, then it was all over.

Lee couldn't fathom how he felt about that, truly.

Ace looked at him again, and maybe caught something of his mood this time. She raised an eyebrow at him, cocked her head.

Her pony-tail fell limply down one shoulder, looking for all the world like the drooping ears of a spaniel. In the darkness, it was more difficult for Lee to see just how young she was; perhaps that was why he had allowed himself to be guided by her.

'Aren't you going to make the connection?' Lee asked, his jaw setting.

Ace nodded, satisfied.

'Here goes nothing,' Ace said tersely, but what she really meant to say was, 'Here goes everything.'

The copper tip of the wire connected with the gold pick-up on the speaker, which started to pull whatever weak power was left in the leaking battery that the Fussies had turned into some kind of acid-feature. As it drank its fill, the speaker allowed some of the limping energy to drip down into the transmitter, which in turn fed the booster, and on and on all around the cavern until the wires somehow reconnected to the battery and the circuit was complete.

There was a flash of smoke and a hint of sulphur.

Somewhere a dim green light began to glow.

‘Quickly,’ Lee urged. Whether he meant before the power fades, or before his nerve failed him, even he wasn’t sure.

‘*Starliner*,’ Ace announced hurriedly into the metal grill, ‘this is the Doctor’s party. Come in *Starliner*.’

Static was quick to answer her. She looked at Lee, who shrugged unhelpfully.

‘*Starliner*,’ Ace began again, but this time was interrupted.

‘Alright,’ hissed a crackling voice, ‘I hear you.’

There was another hiss, followed by a belch of smoke as the voice started to fade in, and out again. Ace and Lee both looked at each other.

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ Lee said, following the trailing wire back away into the darkness.

Ace nodded, grateful. If she’d had more time, she might have noticed the part of herself that appreciated how effectively she and Lee had dealt with the crisis, without words. She might even have mused idly about what kind of adventures two outsiders with a love of explosives might have been able to get up to in the universe of the future. If there’d been time, there probably would have been a moment of shock too – disgust at how quickly she was looking for a replacement for the Doctor.

After all, it wasn’t as if she had left the Doctor, not yet. It wasn’t as if the fun had completely dried up. Not completely.

Luckily for Ace, she had no time, and so simply leant in to the transmitter and said:

‘*Starliner*, this is the Doctor’s party requesting immediate pick-up.’

The voice crackled and hissed again, the pilot giving a popping chuckle over the airwaves.

‘Didn’t I tell you? Five minutes and you’ll be begging to get away, I said. Didn’t I?’

Unfortunately, even though she was pushed for time, Ace could still spare a few moments to growl at a know-it-all.

‘Shut it. This is important,’ she snapped. ‘As in ten minutes ago. And

we need you to put a call in for us.’

The static hissed again, interrupting her mid-flow.

‘Sorry, Doctor,’ the pilot said, to his credit only sounding a little put out. ‘Didn’t get anything after "important". Please repeat.’

‘I said,’ Ace began hurriedly, but was soon interrupted again.

Somewhere behind her there was a loud snapping pop – as if someone had snapped a still living branch from a tree by jumping on it – and the acrid smell of burning plastic began to burn her throat. The voice of the pilot faded quickly, until it was little more than the muttering of an insect as he frantically asked her to repeat what she had said. Then it died altogether, leaving Ace talking to a dead transmitter, nothing more than a lump of plastic and metal. Somewhere, a pale green light faded and died.

‘Shit,’ Ace hissed, dropping the two-way speaker. It cracked open as it hit the damp rock floor below.

She turned to look behind her, and saw Lee crouched on the floor in one of the dark corners of the cavern. The Doctor’s wire trailed under his feet, connected to something that the miner must have been examining. Whatever it was, it was on fire, judging from the dark smoke in the air and the way Lee refused to touch it. He was just crouched, his back an arch and his body unmoving. Even his head was bowed, as if in prayer. Still, perhaps there was something that could be salvaged, just long enough to get the message out. The Doctor was counting on her; Ace wouldn’t let *him* down.

‘What happened?’ she asked, edging forwards.

There was no reply.

Lee didn’t even move.

‘Lee?’ she said, but he didn’t answer.

Moving forward, Ace saw the wire snaking away under Lee’s feet, twisting through them and away into the darkness without connecting to anything. The smoke in the air was clearing now, but it was thicker further into the cave; whatever had caused the radio to give up the ghost, it wasn’t anywhere near where Lee was crouched. No, the old miner was looking at something else.

Something that had made him completely forget how important the call was.

‘Lee?’ she tried again, placing a hand delicately on his shoulder.

He didn’t flinch, but Ace had to fight the urge to pull her hand away.

The miner was staring at the wall, his mouth set so that it was little more than a line drawn on his face. His eyes glistened in the half-light, as he stared down at one of the tiny Fussy buildings. Ace looked down at it too, and tried not to say anything. The Fussies were industrious little bleeders – they’d built up a whole city out of nothing in the same time the colonists had built their home. But the colonists had brought the means to make their homes with them – the Fussies had had to use whatever they could find. And they had, letting nothing go to waste. The home Ace was looking at alone had the plastic wood for a roof, canvas walls, and a battered pocket knife as a centre-piece above the doorway.

The arch of the doorway itself was made from greying bone, jagged and rough.

Greying human bone.

Ace felt sick.

‘I’m sorry,’ Lee said, not moving, not taking his eyes from the delicate bones. They were tiny – probably part of a hand or a foot, or a mixture of both – and they had been fixed together using some kind of thick glue, carefully placed by an unthinking or unknowing architect to form a gentle arch over the threshold.

If it had been anything else, Ace might have marvelled at the little robots’ dexterity. As it was, she just tried not to lose her lunch. Lee leant forward and plucked the knife from its housing.

‘This was Ryan’s,’ he said grimly.

Ace couldn’t bring herself to say anything at all.

Chapter Nineteen

6. August, 6048 CE

17:03

Cole looked down at Bernard, lying on his side at the bottom of the

staircase, held to the floor by the weight of the machine that was supposed to keep him mobile. The fall had knocked the dolphin clean out – perhaps even killed him – and already a livid bruise was coming up purple against its grey, sleek skin. Cole paced down the stairs slowly, his broom in his thick fingers.

He'd never felt anything like the fluidity of its swing and the sudden abrupt jolt as it connected with solid bone before.

Connected hard.

Looking again, Cole could see that Bernard wasn't dead; his blowhole was opening and closing sporadically. Still, perhaps the blow could still kill him, if he went long enough without being seen by the doctor. Cole surprised himself with how little the idea worried him, or at least he would have if he could have felt anything at that moment.

Standing at the bottom of the stairs, broom in hand, Bernard's body prostrate beneath him.

Cole was suddenly gripped by the urge to stamp on the dolphin's head, to see its skull crack.

He dropped the broom. It clattered on the floor.

'I can't tell you how good that felt,' he said aloud, looking down. 'I've never felt right around that dolphin. He always set me on edge.'

Cole didn't turn, didn't even move from watching Bernard, as if at any moment he expected the dolphin to leap up, all guns blazing. He didn't need to turn; he could feel the Doctor at his heels, his sad, grey eyes mournfully on the barkeeper's broad back. Cole heard the umbrella tip tap the plasticrete floor, just the once.

'It's a common complaint,' came the sad reply from behind him. 'They think, they talk like humans do, but the way they move... The body language is all wrong. It makes humans nervous.'

As he spoke, the Doctor moved round Cole slowly. He didn't creep, he didn't edge, he gave no indication that he thought he might be next under the broom handle. He just paced round so slowly and gently that Cole didn't notice, like a cat pacing around a feeding bird. One moment he was behind him unseen, the next and the little man was crouched next to the dolphin's prostrate body, his nimble fingers dancing over grey skin and acupressure points.

‘Nah, man,’ Cole said, shaking his head. ‘It’s not ’cause he’s a dolphin. It’s just him.’

The Doctor didn’t say anything, just went on examining his patient.

‘I genned up on dolphins, you know. When I knew we was going to be living with one. Before we came here. Got steaming with a bottlenose called Car-ar klik-klik on Shotton Station. He told me how much we owe to them. All this. Space travel, and all that.’

The Doctor nodded slowly, but his face was hidden by his straw hat. Still his fingers danced.

‘A truly alien species, living close enough to touch, to study,’

the little man agreed. ‘If it hadn’t been for the dolphins, it might have taken humans centuries longer to learn how to facilitate interspecies communication.’

‘They were the first interstellar fighter pilots too. If it wasn’t for them, we’d probably all be wearing fur coats and saluting the Grand Marshall now.’

‘Who better to pilot a craft in a 360° environment than someone who was born into one?’ the Doctor asked rhetorically.

Cole nodded; it was exactly what had been said on the Shotton Station, while the astrophysicists carefully detailed every second of Shotton Solaris’s descent into a fully fledged supernova. He looked down at the grey-skinned creature on the floor below him. It looked so peaceful lying there, almost as if it was sleeping. Cole didn’t even know where Bernard slept; Car-ar klik-klik had had his own sleeping pool, but somehow Cole couldn’t see Bernard submitting to the water unless it was absolutely necessary.

‘They’re a damned fine breed, I’ll give you that,’ Cole said, shaking his head slowly. ‘So why do so many of them have to be such vicious bastards, eh?’

Cole heard the Doctor chuckle sharply, like a bark.

‘I’ve heard many people say exactly the same thing about humans,’ he said, looking Cole in the eye. ‘He’ll be fine, just a touch of a sore head when he comes to.’

Cole nodded, his face set.

‘I’m not sure I want him to be alright.’

The Doctor stood then, a strange fire in his eyes, and fixed Cole to the spot.

‘I think there have been enough needless deaths on Heritage, don’t you?’

Cole let his face drop, unable to hold the Doctor’s gaze.

‘Besides,’ the Doctor continued, slightly more jovially, ‘he’ll have a hard enough time telling anybody what happened to him.

I’ve disconnected his translator. I don’t suppose anyone on Heritage speaks Cetacean do they?’

Cole snorted, his spirits beginning to lift already.

‘If he had the vocal cords, he wouldn’t speak it himself.

Can’t you turn his walker off as well, mind? I don’t much like the idea of him sneaking up behind me to get his own back.’

But the Doctor was shaking his head again.

‘Not without disabling his vapour-net. And without that, he’d soon dry up and die in this heat, I’m afraid.’

Cole looked away, but didn’t argue.

Instead, he picked up his broom and carried it over to his bar, resting it gently against the surface. He wasn’t even sure why he still had the stupid thing; it had been bought with him before anyone had bothered to explain about the Fussies, vital luggage weight that could have been better used elsewhere. Still he’d kept it, long after it should have been fed into a plasticrete generator for its vital molecules. Sometimes it came in handy, sweeping the dust the Fussies were too bloated to eat away into a corner.

Mostly it sat unused behind the bar. Unused, but always in sight, a symbol perhaps of his lofty intentions to sweep away his past life and make a clean start.

A fine job he’d made of that. His parents would be so proud.

At least you stuck at this one more than five minutes, he could hear his mother saying.

‘I told you not to get involved, Doctor,’ Cole said gravely, fixing the little man with his sternest stare. Cole had worked some of the grimmest, roughest jobs in the galaxy – jobs that no one else would do or would survive long doing – and he had developed a pretty mean thousand-mile stare in the process. The Doctor didn’t even blink. ‘I said you should get back on your ship and go home. And now I’m telling you; you’re going home.’

You and your friend. And I’m going to make sure you make it.

Do you hear?’

The Doctor didn’t respond, instead choosing to kiss the red handle of his umbrella.

‘And what about you?’ he asked finally.

‘I chose to come here, Doctor,’ Cole said without hesitation, his heart sinking even as he realised he was speaking the truth. ‘I chose to stay. And I chose to do everything I did here. We all did. And it’s stained us. You can see it, can’t you? It’s tainted our skin, our hair, our flesh. It’s in us. It covers us like this bloody dust. Everything we’ve done, everything we did, it made us who we are.’

‘But who you are now isn’t who you were then,’ the Doctor said, leaning forward, his fingers twitching eagerly. ‘And if you let that rule you, you’ll never find who you *are*! You’ll never be free of it. And you’ll never make amends.’

Cole shivered slightly, but couldn’t take his eyes from the little stranger.

Suddenly the world was just two pools of soft grey light, and a soft Scottish accent.

‘I think it’s time,’ the Doctor said softly, but firm. ‘It’s time you washed away all the secrets, and the lies, and the guilt. It’s time that we put what went wrong here right.’

Cole’s heart beat faster.

‘It’s time you told me what happened here,’ the Doctor said, and his voice would brook no questioning.

But still Cole didn’t speak.



Ace didn't know what to say. She stood awkwardly behind Lee, not touching him, not letting even a single finger fall on his shoulder. She didn't whisper any words of comfort, didn't pass on any of the wisdom, any of the things she had learnt in countless times and places. She couldn't. There just wasn't anything she could say; she didn't have the words. She saw death

– truth be told, there wasn't really a day went by she didn't see it take someone – and she saw others destroyed by it, curling up into balls of nothing and tears.

She saw it every day, but she didn't know how it felt.

The first person she'd known who'd died was her gran. Old and tired, she'd gone to bed one night and just couldn't summon the energy to wake herself up again. Ace had only been young, hadn't really understood at the time, only later. And then she couldn't really remember her gran that clearly, just a few memories, an address. Couldn't remember the longing, the missing her just because she would never be there again, the long tear-filled nights. She couldn't remember it, because she packed it away neatly and quietly in a little cold box that she never went near again. She warmed herself against it, that cold – didn't let herself feel its chill ever. Others had died since Gran, of course, but she just packed their memories away in that box, and if she felt the chill coming on her, then she simply lit a fire to warm herself against it.

And as more people died, and the chill grew stronger, so the fires grew bigger and fiercer, to take the chill from her bones.

That was all she was ever trying to do. Just keep herself warm.

So now she stood here, inches away from Lee. She could see the fear on his face, the despair. She could read his thoughts; he's gone, he's gone, never to see him no more. And all she needed to do was reach out and lay a warm hand on his shoulder, and take the chill from his bones. It was easy; the Doctor had done it to her a thousand times before. Reached out and tweaked her nose, transferred just a little of his invulnerability to her and made her understand that she had to keep going.

The trouble was, she couldn't for the life of her think what she could say to Lee.

Put it away. Lock it in a little cold box and never think about it again. Block it out and ignore it so hard the only way it can ever enter your

mind again is to sneak up when it's dark and you're not looking. Run from it, hide, and you'll feel alright, most of the time. And when you don't, shout and rage and burn and burn and burn.

What kind of legacy was that to pass on to anyone?

Was that what others would do, if it was her instead of Mel?

The Doctor?

'We'd better try and fix the radio,' she said, feebly. She knew it wasn't the right thing, but couldn't be absolutely sure that it was the wrong thing, so she said it in the absence of anything else. 'The Doctor's counting on us.'

Lee didn't move. She could see the grease on his head, holding his hair back, glistening in the pale light. She could see the grey hairs – just how much older was he than her? – and compared them with the pictures of Ryan she'd seen in his house. Young, slim, hairline receding but everything else about him suggested it was premature. Just how long had Lee been waiting, hoping that somehow, against all odds... To suddenly find the truth lying there without warning, desecrated and constructed into his own tombstone.

'I...' said Lee. Nothing else moved. 'I...'

Perhaps normally Ace would have been embarrassed, would have run. Perhaps she would have slapped Lee, told him to pull himself together because now wasn't the time to fall apart. They were needed. There was important work they had to do, and there was time to cry for the dead later. Perhaps normally she'd say that, but not now, not here in the darkness. All she could do now was remember a charred picture, two red-haired lovers in front of their dream home.

But she had to say something. Had to make them both feel better, somehow.

'Perhaps it was an accident,' she said lamely.

He looked at her, his eyes clouded. She could read his thoughts through his shattered features; you think perhaps they made him a door by mistake? She pushed her fingernails into her palms, so deep she nearly drew blood. Stay focused.

'I mean perhaps he fell,' she said, her voice firmer. 'The robots wouldn't know not to... Well, they're only robots.'

Lee turned back to the remains, reaching out to brush them with a dry finger. What did they feel like? Ace wondered. And what drove him to need to find out? Ace had touched death herself, more than once, and each time it hadn't offered any comfort. Just cold flesh, drying blood, copper and iron tainting her skin.

'No,' Lee said, firmly. His voice was deep, and echoed around them in a most disturbing fashion. 'This wasn't an accident.'

'You can't tell that.'

'Yes I can,' Lee said, his knees giving way and he crouched, leaving him slumped uncomfortably on the floor. All the animation, all the life, had left him the moment he saw those bones; he was just a walking corpse, now. 'Ryan worked these mines for years. He knew them, intimately. After they closed, he came here every night. She was more of a lover to him than I ever was. He knew her. Nothing this mine could throw at him could surprise him. Nothing could do this to him by accident.'

This was deliberate.'

Ace knew it was ridiculous. She knew it was grief speaking –

she'd said some pretty stupid things herself, in an effort to rationalise the empty feeling inside. That's all it was. Lee had just lost his lover. It was shock, nothing more. The trouble was, Ace couldn't help but believe him. Even though he had told her how dangerous the mines were, even though she had seen it for herself countless times in the past hour, she still couldn't help it.

In the pale light, feeling the weight of the earth above pressing down on her, hearing the steady drip drop drip of water percolating through from whenever the hell it last rained on Heritage.

Her hackles rose. She had to fight the urge to hiss.

She remembered her first instinct; something evil lurking in the darkness, preying on the weak and unwary. A presence so strong she could almost taste it, growing fat on horseflesh and farmers. Burning down farms to destroy the evidence, to draw suspicion away elsewhere. Something dank, dark and intelligent.

Down here in the darkness, it was impossible to deny the possibility. It was impossible not to feel your heart quicken.

There was an electric lurch in her stomach, as if the ground had suddenly opened up beneath her. Ace realised that they weren't alone.

Surrounding them in the dark, were twenty glowing eyes, all fixed on her and Lee.

The Fussies.

'No accident,' she muttered, her throat dry.

## Chapter Twenty

6. August, 6048 CE

17:12

The sun finally gave up on Heritage at 17:09 hours and 56

seconds. Sheriff watched it fall behind the horizon, chasing away faster and faster the lower it got. And then finally it was gone, and behind it came its pursuers, the two glowing moons dancing around each other joyously. They owned Heritage now, it was their pale light that rained down on her, that failed to warm, for all their radiance. The cold gripped Sheriff even through his leather duster, pulling the blood away from his skin and deep inside himself to keep it from freezing. But he didn't move. He didn't care. He was dead and cold already.

Staring at the moons in the night's sky, Sheriff couldn't help but remember.

Cole and the Doctor moved away from the bar as fast as they could, the Doctor leading the way even as the sun disappeared from the sky. It wasn't particularly dark – it was never particularly dark on Heritage, with two moons gleaming down on you – and light spilled out of most of the houses onto the main road, so it should have been easy going. But they weren't walking on the main road, and wherever the light was, they weren't. But still the Doctor led the way unerringly, towards the landing pad.

Bernard had been dragged into the back room, slid in alongside Cole's vodka still. The delicate glass wouldn't survive one of Bernard's temper tantrums, Cole knew. Perhaps the dolphin had already been discovered, and the precious glass and firewater was already waste-littering the floor, waiting for the Fussies to drink deep.

Cole couldn't find it in himself to be too worried.

Instead he remembered.

Somehow, it only seemed natural to tell the Doctor, as they scurried away together.

'It all started, I reckon, in Sheriff's office,' he said, his voice husky and low. 'A good few years back now.'

The Doctor said nothing, his eyes twinkling in the moonlight.

It had been quite a dark night, Sheriff remembered, with thin clouds wisping over the moons and stealing their light, drinking it in to themselves. It had been quite a dull day, too, and a few days later there would be one of those irregular cloudbursts that kept Heritage habitable, and everybody out in the streets enjoying the novelty. But he didn't suppose that was significant.

Not everything that happened could be blamed on the weather.

Sheriff had been tending his office, moving furniture around to help the Fussys that was busy gorging itself on red dust. A plant of some description or other was holding open the cell door, letting the air circulate and keeping everything fresh. His duster had been hanging neatly on the back of the door, unused; he had done his rounds for the day – the nodding and smiling and warning – and the night was still cool enough for him to go without if he was to venture out again. He didn't think he would; a quiet night in with a pack of cards and a couple of friends was the biggest excitement he was expecting.

Then something else came up.

Cole burst into Sheriff's hut, his face red from the exertion of running. His eyes were wide and his pupils two pinpricks in a sea of white. Sheriff knew the symptoms of shock well; he was already out of his seat and motioning Cole into it before the barman was even speaking. when he did, it was with a shake of his head to refuse the offer of the chair.

'You'd better come,' he said, his voice thin and hollow.

He wouldn't be drawn any more than that.

Sheriff got his coat.

They sat in the dust, knees hugged close to their chins in a vain effort to keep the chill of the approaching night out. The Doctor's eyes were deep and mournful as he listened to Cole tell his story. They hadn't reached the landing pad yet – Cole hadn't felt he could relive that night and walk, and so they'd ducked in behind the last building in the row. The Doctor had insisted that he'd be able to hear anyone before they got close enough to apprehend them. Right at that moment, Cole couldn't care if they were caught or not.

He took a deep breath, and continued the story.

'I shouldn't've been there, not really. Steve Cooke owed the Professor a favour, and I owed Steve. We worked out a deal where I'd settle with Wakeling, and everyone would be evens.

And I had to tell him. So I went, that night, that minute – I couldn't have gone the night before, or just a few minutes earlier, could I? No, I had to go then.

'Old Butler was there by the time I got Sheriff back – the old man was huffing and puffing a bit, even then – and he'd done what he could. There was a sheet from the bedroom over her –

over Melanie, your friend. I hate to say it, but it's true; it was a blessing that he had. I don't think I would've stood looking at her again. Not even for a second.'

Cole looked at the Doctor for the first time since he'd started speaking, his eyes doleful and red. If the Doctor felt any pity for him, he kept it hidden behind the shadows in his eyes.

He didn't speak a word, hadn't since the tale had begun.

The little man's fingers flexed, and he released his knees from his embrace.

Cole looked back at the dust, seeing blood.

'Ben was there. Little man he was – I could've joined my fingers round his waist. He wasn't saying owt. Not a word. He just sat in one of Wakeling's chairs like he was made of marble, just a statue staring at the floor. Wakeling was just across the room from him, close enough to throttle. I reckon I might've, if it had been my wife. But Ben didn't. He just sat, and Wakeling just sat and all. I couldn't tel you which of them looked the worse for it.'

‘Then Sheriff spoke.’

He remembered it clearly, word for word. He ought to; he’d run them all through his head time and time again since that night.

He’d seen himself – round and out of place – looking down at a woman wrapped in a white sheet and Doc Butler slowly shaking his head. He’d felt his stomach lurch as he saw Ben Heyworth’s face, and knew without asking who it was lying under the sheet.

Knew without asking which family had lost its wife, its mother.

‘What happened?’ he’d said, his voice low and calm. Field training flooded back to him; someone’s going to panic in a crisis, sure as shit it better not be you, boy. ‘Ben?’

The little husband looked up then, his face a blank slate.

Receding red hair, eyebrows so bleached they were almost white, and pale eyes that couldn’t see enough, couldn’t take it all in. His mouth came open, but his face showed no sign that it knew what would come out. It didn’t really matter; Sheriff already knew. He knew the way you knew bad news was in the air, knew because of all the things that could’ve happened there was only one that was the worst.

‘He killed her,’ Ben managed, and his mouth fell shut again.

Looking back, Sheriff thought that was the moment he’d first heard his ulcer roar.

‘That true?’ he drawled, fixing Wakeling with a grim stare.

Looking at him, Sheriff almost felt sorry for him; guilt was already eating him up from the inside. Didn’t matter what the law did, Wakeling had already been served his punishment.

‘D’you do it?’

Wakeling’s mouth bobbed like a fish’s for what seemed like a week.

‘I just pushed her. I just pushed her out of the way.’

That was when Cole spoke up, stepping forward slightly. He was obviously unwilling to intrude into the crime scene too much, in case it resented it and touched him with its bony cold fingers. Instead he just shuffled in the doorway, and pointed.

‘He pushed her with that,’ the Brit said.

Sheriff looked. Lying on the floor was an instrument, not the newest but pretty heavy and pretty tough. It was already beginning to stick to the floor as the blood pooled around it began to congeal and set. He didn’t touch it then, not like he held it in his hands now. Not like he turned it and endlessly fussed it as he sat out on the ‘Flats. No, he’d just crouched down then and looked at it, squinting slightly as if hoping it would reveal itself as nothing more than a trick of the light.

‘She was dead before she hit the first step,’ Doc Butler said, ever sensitive.

Sheriff had looked back up the steps then, and tried to imagine what she’d looked like as she fell. It didn’t make for a comforting image.

And that’s when it came to him, as the words dropped from his mouth one by one.

Cole couldn’t look at the Doctor, even though the little man was nothing more than a shadow beside him. Even the cold light of the moons failed to illuminate him, failed to set a twinkle in his eyes. He was a dark tear in the fabric of the universe, and the light merely bled into him, through him, on its way elsewhere. If Cole looked into that, what might he see?

‘Sheriff didn’t even take half a look round. He’d already decided before he even got there. "An accident," he said. "A stupid tragic accident." He said that she’d tripped at the top of the stairs, and hit her head as she fell. He made us say it, too.

Doc Butler, me, Wakeling. And we all did, Doctor. We all said it.

Except Ben.’

Still the Doctor didn’t move.

There were many things Sheriff had done in his life that he wasn’t proud of. Things before he gave away his name, things he came to Heritage to put behind him and forget. If he could, he would’ve wiped them all away. But he had done them. There was no denying that. He had done them because they needed to be done, and he was there to do them. That was what he’d felt, crouched down on his knees in front of Heyworth that night.

Talking to him calm and clear, even though on the inside... He’d done



what needed to be done because he was the only one there to do it.

He'd done many things that he wasn't proud of, but it was what he did that night that had finally broken him, where none of the others had.

'Ben,' he'd said, his voice only cracking slightly. 'Ben, the professor's got some important work to do here. If he can finish that, it'll be a new life for all of us. A second chance. We'll be the centre of the universe, and everybody will want to be right here where we are. Money, jobs, security. No more scraping a living out of the dust. No more struggling, not for me, not for you.

Not for your daughter.'

He'd looked briefly around then, perhaps wanting to judge the others' reactions, perhaps just unwilling to take the look in Ben's eyes any more. Each man in the room – Doc Butler, Cole, Wakeling – each man was looking at him and hanging on his words, digesting them slowly. And each of them was coming to the uneasy conclusion that each man felt exactly the same as his companions. Sheriff thought that must've been a tough thing for them to live with. But not as tough as being the one who said it first. 'If I arrest him, he'll be taken away. They'll come and they'll put him on a prison planet, and someone with smarts like his will come and take away his work, make it their own. They'll take it all away from here, and we'll be left with nothing,' Sheriff fixed his eyes to Ben's, and hissed insistently. 'If I arrest Wakeling, then we all suffer. The whole of Heritage'll get punished for his mistake.'

All eyes were on Ben now. No one breathed.

'Is that what you want, Ben?' Sheriff asked.

Perhaps if he'd have spoken then, it might have broken that spell. If he'd have said something – anything – then the three men might've stopped and realised what they were doing, what they were agreeing to. What they were giving up. They might have realised that the price was too high. Or perhaps once the idea was out there, once it had been given form and shape, it was inevitable that it would have to be carried out. Perhaps there was nothing to stop it growing in their minds, no matter what Ben said. If he decided to get in its way, well, every house had more than one sheet.

The whole thing was academic, anyway. Ben didn't say a word.

'Cole, why don't you take Ben here home,' said Sheriff softly, placing a meaty hand on the man's shoulder.

And like a good soldier, Cole had stepped forward and done what he was told.

The Doctor stood up then, the moons throwing his shadow over the still crouching Cole. His umbrella was clutched tightly in his hand, his eyes closed tight as he muttered something under his breath. Cole shivered, but the chill eating into his bones didn't come from the night air. It came from inside him, and it was slowly eating its way out. Every word he spoke gave it a greater hold on him, freezing his insides numb and number.

The Doctor looked down at him, fire in his eyes, and shook his head.

Cole couldn't look in his eyes any more.

'You allowed a man to get away with murder,' the words fell to sting against Cole's flesh. 'With the murder of my friend.'

Cole closed his eyes tight, blacking out the dusty world.

'It gets worse,' he breathed.

Ace closed her eyes. She could feel the little robots milling around her, surrounding her. Lee wasn't much use; he was still crouched on the floor, holding Ryan's hand for the first time in years. So it was just her. Fair enough – she'd been in tighter scrapes than this. And if these little tin-can vacuum cleaners thought they were going to take her without a fight, well, the things were out of their tiny diodes. She had a plan. Of course, it involved her smashing ten robots so quickly that they didn't get a chance to do whatever it was they did to people before making them into an interesting feature. So it was an optimistic plan. It was better than no plan at all.

And then Lee spoke, in that deep and quiet voice of his, and Ace forgot all about her plan.

'This wasn't an accident,' he intoned, sending sparks crackling down Ace's back. 'He did it on purpose.'

Ace looked around at the glowing eyes all around her.

Suddenly, she realised she might have been too hard on the little things. That was travelling with the Doctor for you; so many of the most unassuming things usually turned out to be out to get you, you just kind of assumed that it was the least obvious suspect who was responsible.

Lee took a deep breath, holding back, composing himself.

‘He killed himself because of me,’ he said calmly. ‘Because of what I did.’

Ace leaned in, closer.

Still the words would not stop coming out of Cole. They had a life of their own now, would not rest until they were all out in the cold night air. They poured from him, no longer willing to be subject to his will. They were free, at last.

‘It wasn’t easy for Ben,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘I don’t have a clue what he told Sweetness. I don’t have a clue what it was like. But he survived. He let Heritage have its future, like we deserved it, but I don’t think he minded too much that his farm was so far from the town. He kept his distance. I would’ve, too.’

He never spoke to Sheriff, or the doctor, or Wakeling. Wouldn’t even look at them. But me... I don’t know why, but he still talked to me.

‘That’s why he came to me,’ Cole said flatly, ‘when he needed help.’

‘Sheriff thought he’d accepted it. That he was doing what was best. Wakeling just thought he was too scared, too scared of what Wakeling was turning into. But he wasn’t. He was just looking for a way to prove it. He was looking for the murder weapon.’

The Doctor looked down at Cole, his expression unreadable.

‘Sheriff had hidden it?’ he asked, his voice sharp through the crisp air. ‘Why not destroy it?’

Cole shrugged.

‘I don’t think he could bear to have it near him for too long.’

He just took it out to the desert and lost it. He didn’t think anyone would find it out there.’

‘But Benjamin did,’ the Doctor mused softly. ‘And when he did, he brought it to you.’

Cole nodded sadly.

‘He wanted me to arrange an off-planet call without Wakeling knowing. Even back then all off-planet talks were routed through Wakeling. He was paranoid someone would tell.’

As if we could do that without turning ourselves in too. But when Ben came to me and he asked me to help, begged me, I told him I'd arrange it, and to wait for my word.'

Cole looked up at the Doctor. Tears were prickling in his eyes, waiting to burst through at any moment. So far he had managed to hold them in, like he had kept everything else in for all those years. But how much longer that would last now, he didn't know. The Doctor was getting everything from him, without asking, without saying a word. Why should he be satisfied until he had taken everything; tears, heart, soul, everything? And if it would lift the weight Cole had been struggling under these last few years, he'd happily give it to him.

'I couldn't think about anything else. It was there, in front of me. All I kept seeing was Sheriff telling us all how it would be, and us agreeing like sheep. If I let Ben tell the universe, they'd take me, too. They'd put me on the same prison ship, and everyone would know what I'd done. Why I was guilty. I couldn't see anything else. I wish I hadn't. I wish I'd been strong enough, but I wasn't. I saved my own neck, goddess help us.

'I told Sheriff, and the useless old drunk told Wakeling.

'He didn't take it well.'

'I remember it clearly,' Lee said slowly. 'I remember it better than anything else I've ever seen. The sun was going down, everybody was doing exactly what everybody did on Heritage. It wasn't a remarkable evening by any means. Just the same dull grind we'd come to know since the mines were closed down.

'And then Professor Wakeling strode out into the middle of the street, climbed onto a box, and started talking. And that changed everything.'

As Lee closed his eyes, his hand went up unconsciously to his slicked back hair. He could feel the oil under his rough skin, greasing into the lines and cracks. He extracted it himself, squeezed from the tree in his backyard. It was a lot of effort to go to where scissors would probably be more efficient, but Ryan had always appreciated it. In the years Ryan had been gone, it had become a habit, a morning ritual to busy his hands and his head. To keep him from thinking too much.

'He was on fire that night,' Lee said softly. 'He lit up the sky like a supernova. There wasn't a single person in the town that didn't come to hear him. Except for Ben Heyworth and his daughter.'

With his eyes closed, Lee could see it all again as clearly as if he was there. Wakeling with the ex-miners and townsfolk all gathered around him, looking up in awe. Captivated by him. His eyes were flashing fire, but the rest of him was calm and still. He looked dashing, demure, dressed conservatively for an important occasion. There wasn't a trace of nerves, but he must have been awash with them, feeling them sliding all over his insides. He was, after all, putting his life into the hands of the townsfolk.

There couldn't have been a single person there who didn't get a little drunk with the power of it, just a little. He knew it had made him light-headed as he'd stood there, next to Ryan, hearing the professor's confession.

'He told us that he had caused the accident that had killed Mel Heyworth. He told us that he and two others had conspired to keep it from everyone, even the town themselves, to allow him to continue his research. He told us that Ben Heyworth had found proof that Wakeling was responsible, and was going to take it to the authorities. He told us that he would let him, if that was what we decided.'

Lee didn't open his eyes. He couldn't bear to see the look on the young girl's face.

Disgust. Revulsion. Horror.

'No,' he heard her say from the darkness. 'You didn't.'

'You weren't there,' Lee said softly. 'You didn't see him. And you hadn't seen all of your dreams dissipate at the company's whim. They way he told it, he was on the brink of something, something so big that it would shake Heritage from its slumber and put us right at the heart of the galaxy. There would be prosperity and jobs and visitors, scientific institutes founded, and tourists by the shipload. We'd make the company envious with our success. But only if Wakeling was allowed to remain. If Heyworth had his way, all we'd ever know was poverty, misery and a dusty death.'

'Wakeling gave himself to us. If he didn't deliver, if he tried to take his discovery elsewhere, we could bring him down. All we had to do was give ourselves to him, and stop Heyworth.'

'You believed him,' Ace said, her voice flat and dead.

'You didn't see him,' Lee answered. 'We had no choice but to believe him.'

‘But Ryan didn’t.’

‘No, not Ryan. He couldn’t. Some others, too. But the rest of us...’

‘So you all ganged up and burnt down his farm. The whole town goose-stepping across the desert with a can of petrol tucked under one arm.’

Lee let both his hands caress his scalp, and clenched his eyes shut. ‘No,’ he murmured. ‘We pulled Benjamin to pieces with our bare hands first.’

And then the silence swallowed them.

At that moment, they sat, the three of them spread across Heritage. Each closed his eyes, each clutched at their own heads as if trying to pluck the pictures right out and throw them away, into the dust. Lee watched by Ace. Cole watched by the Doctor.

Sheriff watched only by the cold eyes of the twin moons. Three men, separated by miles, each one thinking exactly the same thing. Each remembering the same night.

They remembered standing in the desert, the red sand fine and dry beneath their feet. The whole town was gathered there, nearly the whole town. Each of them was catching their breath, seeing it steam in front of their faces as it hit the cold air, head on. Each was only just beginning to realise what they had done, what they had allowed to happen. What would haunt them in their darkest moments, when no one else was around to help share the pain. They had done it in Heritage’s name, to keep her alive, but each of them was starting to realise that they might just have dealt her a mortal wound.

That night, Heritage began – slowly – to die.

They stood, the three of them there again, and watched as the Heyworth farm flickered and burnt, thick black smoke rising up to hide the devastation from the innocent eyes of the twin moons. Each watched as Wakeling held the Heyworth’s little girl tight in his arms, as she watched the fire impassively. Each watched as Wakeling gave a satisfied smile, and cast his eyes around the gathered townsfolk. Each watched the others as they realised; they had just handed themselves to Wakeling, body and soul.

And still he smiled.

## Chapter Twenty-One

6. August, 6048 CE

17:34

As a tiny shuttlecraft roared overhead, Sheriff threw the murder weapon as far away as he could.

Episode Four

## Chapter Twenty-Two

6. August, 6048 CE

17:37

For a long time, the Doctor didn't say anything. He just stood there, looking down at Cole, clutching his umbrella to his chest.

His face had set firm, his eyes the only living thing left about his body. Despite the clothes he wore, the way he so nearly passed by without comment but somehow was just slightly wrong, Cole didn't find anything amusing about him. Looking at that cold, hard face, Cole found it difficult to believe he had ever felt afraid before. If he had, it was nothing like the fear he felt now.

When the strangers had first arrived, everyone had been afraid they would uncover the truth. Now they had, and Cole knew that there was no one who would punish those responsible as effectively as this avenging angel, hiding behind the skin of a man.

Trouble was, Cole knew he was one of those responsible.

'I've been very foolish,' the Doctor said eventually, still unmoving.

'What are you going to do?'

The Doctor gave Cole a strange look.

'First, we are going to make sure Ace is alright. I won't let anything happen to her,' he answered, planting his umbrella firmly in the sand. 'And then I think I should have a word with Professor Wakeling.'

'You can't take on the whole town.'

The Doctor fixed a grey eye on Cole. He shivered, involuntarily.



‘Yes I can,’ the little man said softly.

Somehow, Cole didn’t doubt it.

Ace looked down at Lee, as he sat in silence, his fingertips resting gently on Ryan’s remains. There were so many Fussies gathered around them now that the tunnel was bathed in the light of their eyes. She could see the way the bones had yellowed and dried, how they’d been tied together with what looked like plastic twine. The knife – Ryan’s pocket knife – had been welded into the metal above the archway, the edges melted until they were soft and blurred.

A Fussy bumped at her leg. She ignored it.

Still Lee didn’t move.

Ace had been convinced there were monsters in Heritage, that something dark and evil was hiding in the mines waiting to devour them. She’d had that feeling ever since she’d arrived that morning. Now she knew she was right. There were monsters here, and they did come from the mines. But they weren’t hiding; they were out in the open and trying their best to look like human beings. But they weren’t, and they’d taken Ace in entirely. She’d even let one of them lure her down into the darkness.

The question was, what was she going to do about it now?

They had killed Mel. They had killed the Doctor’s friend, and by doing that they’d taken something from her, too. They’d taken her invulnerability. They’d made her think, again: what if that was me?

She wanted to hurt them, for what they’d done to her.

‘Ace,’ Lee said softly, tears still choking his rich voice. ‘You had better go.’

Looking down, Ace realised that the Fussies were trying to tell her the same thing; they were batting against her legs, gently with their noses, trying to herd her back the way she’d come. But looking down at Lee, hearing his silent tears drip against the slick floors, she knew she couldn’t leave him. He was a monster. She wanted to punish him. He was her friend, and she wanted to comfort him. What he had done, what they had all done, how could anyone forgive that? Instead, she stood, saying nothing.

‘Go, Ace,’ he said again, more firmly. ‘Somebody has to get away from

here. Do you understand? Tell the Doctor. Tell the universe. Let everybody know what we did here. Don't let us get away with it.'

Without another word, Ace let herself be lead away by the Fussies.

Lee remained, with the bones.

It didn't take them long to reach the shuttle, considering. The Doctor hardly said a word, just set off briskly towards the landing pad. But the change in him was clearly evident. His eyes were sharp and alive, his head held proud and high as he scanned the horizon for any sign of trouble. He didn't look like he was trying to avoid it, more like he was hoping for some, just to give him an excuse to get involved. When Cole had first seen him, he had looked like a crushed and defeated man. Now he looked the way the girl had; strong and sure, ready to put things to rights.

The only difference was, looking at the Doctor, you could see he knew he could do it. His confidence was infectious, giving Cole a feeling he hadn't had for many years.

Hope.

'I don't see Lee or your friend,' Cole said, looking across at the shuttle. It was sitting on the pad, immobile, the red dust starting to cling to it.

The Doctor didn't look back.

'I told Ace we'd meet here,' he said firmly. 'She'll turn up.'

But his eyes were still flicking across the horizon, looking for something.

Cole knew he was worried about her.

It had taken them only a few seconds to reach the shuttle, the Doctor striding surprisingly fast despite his short little legs.

Cole found himself puffing as he tried to keep pace, and was still a few seconds behind when they arrived at the door. It was open, the gangplank already down, but the inside was dark. There didn't seem to be any movement inside. Cole made to walk up the plank, his mouth opening to shout a greeting but he found himself pulled back by the Doctor's umbrella as the handle looped around his arm. He put a finger to his lips, and pointed to the ground with the tip of his umbrella.

There were bootprints scuffed into the red dust.

Cole looked at the Doctor, and he nodded slowly. Taking the lead, the little man began to sneak up the gangplank silently as a cat. Cole followed behind, overly aware of every creak and crack the gangplank made as he crept up behind the Doctor. He tried to put his artificial arm out for balance, but the dust was starting to clog up the gears and it made a grumbling groan as it moved, so he left it be. He just prayed whoever was inside hadn't heard it.

The Doctor disappeared into the darkness.

Cole held his breath and followed.

Once inside, it took his eyes a few moments to acclimatise to the gloom, and left him blinking them clear. Slowly, the shuttle came into focus – just a small box really, with different instruments dotted here and there. There were two seats welded onto the floor in the back, but Cole suspected the shuttle was originally designed for carrying cargo. It was certainly a much lower grade than the giant colony ship that had brought them to Heritage, sustaining them even as they vulcanised it to build a new home.

‘Here, help me move him,’ came the Doctor’s voice from the front of the ship.

Cole looked up, and saw the Doctor trying to untangle what looked like an eagle from a cradle of glowing wires at the front of the shuttle. The eagle was suspended limply in the air, a tiny pair of metal-rimmed spectacles hanging from his face. Blood was matting the feathers on his head, dripping down onto the manual controls below. The bird’s talons were shining with the stuff, too. Cole had never seen anything like it in his life.

‘What is it?’ he breathed, stepping over cautiously.

‘It’s Hadoke, our pilot. He brought us here from a little planet just outside your solar system,’ the Doctor’s voice was low and grave. Cole couldn’t see his eyes, which was a blessing. ‘We’ll have to arrange to take him back there, so his family can bury him.’

Reverently, the Doctor took the spectacles from the bird’s face, and folded them before dropping them into one of his pockets. Between them, they managed to lift the bird down, too, and rest its body on the pilot’s seat – obviously the shuttle was also designed with a more traditional pilot in mind. Cole couldn’t take his eyes off the little

creature, but the Doctor had already turned to the controls, his nimble fingers dancing again.

‘These are dead, too,’ he muttered to himself, angrily.

Cole knew why he was angry. If they hadn’t stopped so that Cole could unburden himself of his secrets, they would have been at the shuttle almost as soon as it landed. They might have been able to stop whatever happened, save the little pilot’s life.

‘Shame,’ drawled a voice behind them. ‘Looks like the main power cells have been damaged. You might want to be careful up there; one good whack could dislodge the safety couplings.’

Cole spun around, whilst the Doctor remained, his eyes dark.

Standing in the doorway was a dark shape, the silhouette of a broad-shouldered young man in a long leather coat. Stepping into the shuttle, Cole could see the dust clinging to Ed’s coat and stubbly hair; he’d obviously rolled under the body of the ship when he’d seen Cole and the Doctor approaching. The red dust had stuck to his coat and T-shirt in several places, thick and clumped. Cole realised it was because both had been wet with blood. The young man smiled an insincere smile, a long metal strut bouncing into his palm and three livid scratches running down his face.

Cole took a step forward.

The strut in Ed’s hand swung out to point at him.

‘I wouldn’t, old man,’ he growled, his teeth sharp.

The Doctor took a step forward.

‘I’m glad you’re here,’ he said amiably. ‘You can take a message to your employer for me.’

Ed chuckled.

‘Employer? You think I do this for *favours*?’

‘You can tell him I’m going to stop him,’ the Doctor continued, regardless. ‘You can tell him there’s no way he can prevail. Because he’s relying on vicious little children like you to protect him. And you can’t. Not from me.’

The Doctor took another step forwards.

Cole's heart leapt.

He'd seen it. He'd actually seen it. As the Doctor took another step – still far too far away from Ed to be able to even spit on him – something had happened. Something wonderful.

As the Doctor took a step forwards, Ed had flinched and taken a step backwards. He'd flinched – he had actually *flinched*! For the first time in his life, Cole could actually see Ed for what he truly was; just a vicious, violent, frightened little child. It was a wonderful feeling, and he'd loved the Doctor then for giving it to him.

'You can go now,' the little man growled.

Ed sneered, but his power was broken.

Instead, he swung out with the metal strut. It cut a clean arc through the air and bit into one of the machines embedded in the wall of the shuttle. There was a shower of sparks as the metal ground in, extinguishing the lights and shattering the casing. It bit so deep that Ed had to leave it hanging there rather than pulling it out. As the sparks began to fade, other machines across the shuttle began to flare and fizz too. Within seconds, everything was sparks.

Ed flashed a grin, and dived headlong out of the shuttle.

'Run!' shouted the Doctor.

Cole didn't even need telling once.

The sand around the shuttle pad was as fine and as soft as any on Heritage, and so loosely packed that it was simplicity itself to crawl through it, almost swimming up from the depths to break free into the fresh night air. Ace hadn't known that just a few minutes ago, but now she did. She had followed the Fussies as they started to burrow into a large bank of sand tumbling in where the tunnel had collapsed, and then suddenly her hands had broken free into the cold and the air.

As soon as her head was clear, she had paused for a second, looking around to find her bearings. It was an odd sight – just her head poking out of the sand; all she needed was jam smeared on her cheeks and she'd look like she'd been abandoned by some moustachioed villain awaiting the intervention of the hero in white. It hadn't taken her long to spot the shuttle resting on the pad, its rear end to her, and offer a silent prayer to whatever maker produced the Fussies. Then she'd kicked and struggled and tried to pull herself out of the earth.

She was about halfway out when the shuttle exploded.

It happened in an instant.

The shuttle was there. The shuttle was gone, only light and heat.

It scalded and blinded, tossing her head carelessly back as it raced out across the desert, raging in all directions. Just as simple as that. Light. Heat. Pain.

Nothing more.

If she could have wound it back, watched it in slow motion, she would have seen a sliver of light erupt from the base of the ship which grew and grew until it swallowed everything. Perhaps she would have even seen the shadow of panels and equipment and debris as it was flung into the air to rain down seconds later.

Perhaps she would, if she'd been wearing her shades. As it was, all she knew was the blast was stinging her face, her ears were ringing, and her retina had swallowed the explosion whole, bloated on the light.

Her eyes watered from the heat, and perhaps something else.

Somehow, Ace knew the Doctor was on the shuttle.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

6. August, 6048 CE

17:58

*‘ Despite producing some very high-profile citizens, the little ex-mining colony of Heritage never really survived the end of its Thydonium mining contract.*

*They struggled through as best they could, but the last colonist left in 6057.*

*Despite the wide number of interviews conducted with ex-Heritageans, no one is particularly forthcoming on the reasons why they left. ’*

Lost Worlds,

an account of the realities of colonisation, Jacqui Fortnum, 7023 CE.

For a moment, the roar of the explosion was so loud, so complete, that there might as well have been no sound at all. It was too big, too vast,

to take in, and so it left ears ringing without even registering. All over Heritage, people looked to the landing pad. Even Bernard, struggling to his feet and finding himself locked in Cole's storeroom-cum-kitchen paused for a moment as his ears began to pop under the pressure of the noise. He cursed, and only then realised that his translator was off-line. He cursed again, chattering, squealing, alien.

By the landing pad, the debris began to thud softly into the sand, still flaming.

Cole landed square on his face, next to where the Doctor had dropped. The little man's hat was singed, and his tattered umbrella was looking a little worse for wear, but he was still breathing. So was Cole. Somehow, that didn't seem like such a bad thing any more.

Ed stood a few feet away, brushing the dust and blood from his coat.

He smiled broadly, and then winced as it stretched his cuts.

'I told you to be careful,' he drawled, waving a dusty hand at Cole. 'Definitely the power cells. Be seeing you. Soon.'

Then he turned and paced away into the night. It only took him a few moments to disappear from the red light offered by the burning shuttle. He didn't even look back. What was the point; he knew that there was nowhere left for them to run.

When Wakeling gave the word, Ed and Christa and Bernard would find them, wherever they went.

Beside him, the Doctor coughed loudly, and started pulling himself to his feet.

'You bastard,' came a woman's voice from behind the wreck of the shuttle. 'You utter scumbag.'

The Doctor looked up, caught halfway through patting the dust from his dark clothes. His face split into a broad grin: not happiness, but relief.

As Cole looked, he saw Ace stomping through the dust.

'Ah, Ace. You made it,' the Doctor said, sounding unconcerned.

He jumped back as he found a finger pressed against his nose.

'Don't give me that,' Ace yelled, almost blowing the Doctor over with

sheer volume. ‘Don’t even start. How could you do that? Why did you let that happen? You’re the Doctor. D’you understand? You’re the Doctor! You’re meant to stop things like that happening. You’re meant to do something amazing at the last minute and defuse the bombs and save the day. Why didn’t you do something?’

The Doctor’s face softened, and he reached up with a dry finger to wipe the tears building in her eyes. Cole wanted to look away, knowing he was intruding, but he couldn’t take his eyes from them.

‘I thought you were dead,’ she shouted, her voice cracking.

The Doctor shook his head sadly.

‘Ace,’ he sighed. ‘You should know better than that. I’m the Doctor.’

Now it was Ace’s turn to shake her head, her pony-tail whipping through the air.

‘No you’re not,’ she said, her voice softer now. ‘You haven’t been the Doctor for months.’

And her brown eyes turned on him, soft and deep and red-lined as the salt started to irritate the delicate skin. The Doctor couldn’t bring himself to look into them, instead letting his own bright eyes fall and stare intently into the sand. He looked to Cole like he was trying to read something written in the intricate scatterings of the grains, some hidden message that only he could see. But Cole knew it was all an affectation. He was just trying to avoid Ace’s eyes, and the hurt that was brimming over in them. He couldn’t bring himself to look at them, to see how much he had disappointed her. It made Cole think about Ben.

‘I owe Professor Wakeling something,’ the Doctor said abruptly, not looking at anyone in particular. Speaking to the night, and her two watchmen. ‘He showed me something, here.

Something I should have seen for myself, but didn’t. I came to Heritage to tidy up a few loose ends in my life. After that... I was starting to think it might be time for a change. Something’s coming, Ace. Something I might not be able to plan for. I was starting to think that perhaps someone else might be better suited to deal with it. Someone who wasn’t me.’

He looked up, looking at his friend with sad, grey eyes.



‘I came here to say goodbye, Ace,’ he said. ‘To Mel. To you.

To everything.’

‘But you can’t!’ blurted Ace, grabbing at the little man’s dark jacket as if she was drowning. ‘You can’t. You’re the Doctor.’

‘Sometimes, I don’t want to be,’ he said softly. ‘Sometimes, all I want to do is play the spoons in a jazz band, and pull ferrets from my trousers to make children smile. Mel knew that. That’s what she reminded me. That’s why I...’

He stopped, pulling himself up short, shaking his head a little.

Ace looked up at him, her eyes wide.

Cole held his breath.

‘But Mel isn’t here any more. Professor Wakeling took that away from me, perhaps forever. And as he did that, he reminded me of something else. He reminded me what evil is, and he reminded me that it has to be fought, no matter what the consequences. Evil cannot prevail.’

Ace pulled back, something spreading slowly across her face, slow as clouds across the face of the moons. As Cole watched, he saw the smile emerge.

‘I think we should pay the Professor a visit, and thank him for reminding me. Don’t you, Ace?’ he asked, holding out his old, lined hand to her. Looking imploringly into her soft brown eyes. Begging forgiveness.

She took his hand in hers.

‘Wicked,’ she said.

Now that the moment was actually here, Wakeling was surprisingly calm.

As the first call was relayed through from Cole’s – showing that Christa was good for something more than scowling and scratching – everything seemed to settle into place. As each caller clicked onto the line, they would introduce themselves by way of announcing their presence; the only viewscreen was in the bar, so only Christa could see the scientists’ faces. Wakeling had to make do with their voices, and the sure and certain knowledge that all eyes were on him. It wasn’t an

entirely uncomfortable feeling.

He had been so relaxed, in fact, that even Bernard's arrival in the house as the conference was just setting up didn't faze him.

Somehow the dolphin's translator had been damaged, so neither of them could understand each other. Wakeling had tried to explain that he didn't have time to repair it right at that moment, but Bernard had kept batting his nose against him urgently. Even that hadn't been a problem; so the damned fish wanted petting.

He would have to go without. Instead, Wakeling manoeuvred him out of sight in the kitchen and stood him next to where Sweetness was patiently waiting. He seemed to get the idea, thank goodness.

So here it was at last. Years of waiting finally over. Sweetness was in the kitchen with her guardian angel, should she decide to get flighty. Christa was manning the conference, and keeping the link in order – well, it was a reasonably simple task, at least. And her conjoined twin Ed, he'd been given his orders, too. So there was no danger that the Doctor would get off-planet, or within a hundred yards of Wakeling's home. At least whilst the conference guests were looking in, invisible. Afterwards, well, then Wakeling and the Doctor would have to have a serious talk.

But not now. Now Wakeling was addressing some of the most pre-eminent biologists in the universe. Of course, some of them considered themselves xenobiologists, but Wakeling was broad-minded enough to realise that was just a matter of perspective.

He allowed himself a smile, and spread his arms wide in greeting.

'My friends,' he said, proud of the non-gender specific, non-species specific greeting he had finally settled on.

Looking back, that was where it had all gone wrong.

Some of his audience had just enough time to mutter that they hadn't even heard of this Wakeling, let alone professed friendship, when the front door opened noisily. The Doctor stood there, his hat raised high above his head and a welcoming grin plastered across that face of his. His hair stood up in a most disconcerting manner, almost as if it too was being raised in some kind of greeting. As Wakeling stared at him – past him –

he could just see the dark shapes of Cole and Ed squaring up to each

other in the street outside. Then the Doctor closed the door and strode into the middle of the room, letting his hat drop back onto his head.

‘I hope I’m not interrupting,’ he said, softly.

‘Well actually...’ Wakeling said, his face a mask of pleasantness. Behind it bubbled thoughts of strangulation; he couldn’t see them, but the sound of the delegates’ mutterings were seeping out of the speakers.

‘I see you’re something of a geneticist,’ the little man bowed on regardless. He used the tip of his umbrella to point around the room as he named the instruments one by one: ‘An ocrideoscope. An extract and splice DNA recalibrator. And that must be a Prometheus Forge.’

Wakeling allowed himself a glance over at Bernard. The dolphin was practically shaking with anticipation, his eyes eager for the right sign, any sign. The professor remembered his dolphin body language and flashed his teeth at the little grey psychopath. The delegates would hopefully take it as a smile, polite ‘Who is this idiot?’ bemusement, but the dolphin would read it as it was meant. To him, it was a clear signal; keep the hell out of my territory, or lose something delicate. The last thing Wakeling needed was Bernard wading in and turning a disaster into a bloodbath.

‘I see you’ve even got an Emra Cradle – I haven’t seen one of those in centuries. What else is there?’

Wakeling spun back to face the Doctor, and found himself staring down the business end of a ripped and tattered umbrella.

The Doctor’s expression was grim, his eyes hooded like a predator’s. Suddenly, they were alone in the universe, eyes in eyes.

‘Oh yes,’ intoned the Doctor, ‘a murderer.’

All was silence.

Ace tried to grumble as she crept slowly across the dry sands, even affecting a snarl and giving a disgusted snort. It sent the fine dust exploding into the air, and set her coughing as it lodged in her throat. It was no good. She wanted to be angry. She wanted to be sulky. Trouble was, it just wasn’t going to happen.

She tried to be angry with the Doctor – furious at how he’d treated her these past few weeks, how close he’d been to giving up without even

letting her know – but it just wouldn't settle.

She was just too relieved that he was back, and they were fighting the good fight together again. It felt good to be part of the bigger picture.

She was so excited by the prospect, she hadn't even whined when the Doctor had told Cole to keep Ed busy and not her.

The mullet-boy had been trying to tail them all the way back from shuttle, with little success; there wasn't much Ace and the Doctor didn't know about tails. Under normal circumstances, she would have been angry at being overlooked – she wasn't afraid of anyone whose fashion sense could best be described as emulating the finest swordsman in all of Mexico – but she said nothing as Cole had nodded nervously. The Doctor would've only told her that her job was far more important, far more dangerous anyway.

If the butterflies in her stomach were anything to go by, Ace would've believed him too.

She checked her watch; Mickey Mouse said that it was a good ten minutes since she'd snuck away from Cole and Ed's street-side slugging match, and four since the Doctor was due to kick up merry hell. With any luck, everybody's eyes would be on the Doctor, and no one would notice a little girl from Perivale sneaking around the back garden. With any luck, no one would even notice until she had swiped little Sweetcakes from right under their noses, and the two of them were doing the two hundred metres dash across the sands. With any luck, everything would go to plan and no one would get so much as a scratch.

And if you believe that, let me sell you this bridge I've got, Ace thought bitterly.

Ace looked up, and risked a glance through the window. She could see the Doctor, centre stage, giving it his best 'Unlimited rice pudding!' speech. His arms were waving around so much that he risked taking all the bad guys out in one go with his umbrella alone. As distraction techniques went, it wasn't the most subtle, but it was working; all eyes were on the little bizarrely dressed man telling them they were evil, and evil couldn't prevail. All eyes except one pair, small round and blue, eyelashes batting. As Ace looked in, Sweetness looked back, and saw her.

For a moment, Ace froze. If the little girl said anything, then that was it.

Sweetness didn't say a word, just looked.

Here goes nothing, thought Ace, and lifted a single finger to beckon the little girl towards her. Sweetness looked at Ace, still silent, and then took a slow glance at Bernard. The dolphin was stood right beside her, guarding her no doubt. His solid metal frame was large and imposing, towering over the little girl. But his tiny black eyes were fixed on the Doctor. Or at least Ace hoped they were – from her vantage point all she could see was his sleek tail twitching with barely contained fury. That usually meant someone was looking at the Doctor, when they started to get furious. Whatever, Sweetness seemed satisfied that Bernard wasn't paying her enough attention.

Apparently without concern, the little girl turned and started walking back to Ace.

One step after another.

All she could do now was wait, and pray that the Doctor could untangle himself from the web he had charged straight into, eyes flashing. If he couldn't. . well, an umbrella wasn't much protection against a hail of bullets.

Ace closed her eyes.

Come on, Professor.

The silence didn't last long.

There was a second, a beat, and then it started. The ten delegates, separated by light years, all began asking questions at once. Who is this man? Murder, what murder? Wakeling threw his hands up and smiled a panicked smile, trying to calm everything down with a few well chosen words; just a local madman, ignore him, scientific jealousy. The Doctor, however, said nothing, added nothing to the cacophony. He just stood centre-stage, waving his umbrella about as if he was conducting the madness. Who knew? Perhaps he was.

All of this was lost on Bernard. Without his translator, the voices were just the bass chatterings of panicked chimps, senseless and unintelligible. From the moment he'd entered Wakeling's house, he'd tried to warn him. He'd tried to tell him about the Doctor and Cole, that they were working together, that it was probably Cole who had called the investigator to Heritage in the first place. The professor had just smiled and ushered him out of the way, ignoring his warnings as just the imitative vocalisations of a promising but ultimately dumb

animal.

Without his translator, Bernard had been stripped of any trappings of humanity he had once possessed. Human was the universal language, and he couldn't speak it – his voice couldn't even begin to replicate the complicated vowel sounds and subtle complexities. He was cursed – a human trapped in the body of a fish – and he was weak. Without his walker, he wouldn't even be able to stand tall like a man. He was disgusting.

His metal feet pawed at the floor as he fought to control his anger.

He knew he could help. He knew he could set everything straight, if only he could understand what was being said.

Wakeling was a great man, a genius, but when it came to dealing with people, he was worse than useless. Bernard understood that he was the boss, because he was smarter and quicker, and because he was Heritage's future. Bernard stuck close to him, not just because loyal service would be rewarded when the riches started flowing, not just because Wakeling kept his walker up to date and running smoothly, but because he was the kind of man that Bernard wanted to be. Because he was the kind of man Bernard could fool himself into believing he was, when he had his translator. A man who got respect because of everything he was, not just because of the pistols slung under his belly.

But when it came down to it, he was a thinker, and sometimes what was needed was good, quick action and to hell with the consequences. Sometimes a bullet could be far more eloquent than all the words in the human language.

Then, just to make things worse, Wakeling's door banged open again.

The echo of the plasticrete against the walls barely even registered, but Sheriff's voice rose loud and clear over the noise.

The Doctor and Wakeling both turned to look at him, and even the delegates were silenced for a moment. Bernard could barely recognise the man; his face was still round and red, his hair cropped close to the scalp. His body still shook with the effort of each breath, struggling with the dust trying to choke him as well as its own sheer weight pulling down on him. But somehow he looked new, different; his face was no longer slack with alcohol, his eyes clear and determined.

His badge was in one hand, and his pistol in the other. He brandished

them both as he shouted.

Bernard didn't understand the words, but he knew the posture.

Sheriff had finally grown some gonads, and was here to arrest anyone who had ever done wrong on Heritage. That would put Wakeling and Bernard at the top of his most wanted list. This had to be the Doctor's work too – there was no way that Sheriff would forget his own self-interest without somebody needling him into it. Was that a look of smugness on the little stranger's face? He was saying something, something that would have made everything clear if only Bernard could understand it.

Wakeling, too, was speaking – asking Bernard for help, telling him to resolve this disaster for good? Bernard couldn't tell; he could no more read faces than he could books.

His undercarriage clicked as his pistols powered up and loaded.

If Wakeling gave a clear signal, the dolphin would be ready for it.

Sheriff strode into the room, his pistol unwavering on Wakeling, every bestial growl he let out directed into the scientist's thin face. He didn't lay a hand on the big man, backing away from him as far as the cramped room would allow, but he did keep baring his teeth in what Bernard took to be an aggressive manner. Sheriff kept pushing, ignoring the Doctor fluttering about at his elbows and the burlblings of the invisible delegates, and finally it happened. Wakeling snapped something back, and pushed the bigger man away from him, his eyes flicking briefly to Bernard.

The dolphin recognised the gesture instantly; Wakeling was teeing him up for the shot.

If Wakeling had shouted 'Shoot him!' Bernard wouldn't have understood, but as it was, the professor couldn't have made it clearer. The dolphin didn't need a translator to know what was required of him now.

Two shots rang out.

Ace was just pulling Sweetness up onto the horse's back behind her when the shots rang out. They were muffled, but unmistakable. She'd heard gunfire too many times before not to recognise it. Sweetness looked back, a look of curiosity on her face. It was probably the first time she'd ever heard somebody get shot, or at least Ace hoped it was.

Ace spared a glance backwards too, and tried not to picture the Doctor falling back onto the floor, clutching at the gaping hole where his chest used to be. Tried not to see him lying on the floor, his life ebbing away.

No. It wouldn't happen like that. Not now.

Now he was the Doctor again.

Instead of going back, Ace dug her heels into Cole's horse and clung on tight with her knees. The horse gave a whinny and snorted steam into the air, before setting its legs to pounding the ground in that old familiar rhythm. Then ground was eaten up, spat out behind them, pushing the town further and further away. Within minutes, they'd be out by the farm again. And then.. well, they'd jump that bridge when it gave out underneath them.

'Don't look back, Sweetness,' Ace heard herself shouting into the roar of the wind. 'Don't look back.'

But the little girl didn't hear her.

Or ignored her.

The Doctor knelt next to Sheriff's body, barely glancing at the two pinpricks in his chest that had eaten away most of his back.

He didn't look at the thick red fluid as it spread slowly across the floor, either. No, he was captivated by Sheriff's glassy eyes, which stared up to the ceiling, as if he could see through it to the stars beyond. The pain, the doubt, the anger that had been his life since Mel had been killed, all that was behind him now. He had found perhaps the only peace that would ever be his. Death.

'You were supposed to wait until we'd split them up,' the Doctor whispered, closing his eyes.

Wakeling was standing in the middle of the room, looking across at Bernard with his jaw hanging slack. The dolphin paced the floor in a cocky manner, obviously feeling that he had saved the day at last. The professor's eyes were starting to bulge, his voice just a vague croaking somewhere in the depths of his throat.

'We've lost them,' came Christa's distorted voice from all of the speakers at once. 'The delegates have closed the connection at their end. All of them.'



‘No!’ Wakeling finally managed to wail, and sank to the floor.

The blood started to pool around his knees.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

6. August, 6048 CE

18:21

Wakeling knelt on the floor and watched his hands try to soak up the blood. They twitched in the thick red liquid, as if they thought there was some way they could pull a solution out of the ruins. He knew there wasn’t. Everything had been ruined, everything torn apart by a trigger-happy dolphin that couldn’t even understand what it had done. And the reason why it couldn’t understand was pacing towards him now, his brows knitted together.

‘It’s over,’ said the Doctor.

That was all. No words of sympathy, no regrets. Just cold, hard facts.

‘You don’t know what you’ve done.’ Wakeling said, not even able to look him in the eyes any more. ‘You don’t know what you’ve ruined.’

The Doctor snorted.

‘I know exactly what I’ve done,’ he sneered. ‘I know exactly what this would have done for Heritage. She really is a very impressive piece of work, despite the flaw in her eyes. Being home to the first successful clone your people have seen would have caught the attention of the universe, for a while. But your successes were still built on the bones of others. I can’t let that happen. You have to be stopped.’

‘That wasn’t my fault,’ Wakening screamed, his face reddening as the blood rushed to touch his skin. ‘It was an accident.’

‘Perhaps,’ the Doctor said. ‘But it wasn’t your decision to make, was it?’

‘You think it was *my* decision?’ the professor almost laughed, looking into the Doctor’s grim face and seeing... nothing. Just another disbeliever. He’d been coming up against them all of his life, had come to Heritage to be free of their constant sniping.

They were either to be convinced or... ‘It was an accident, Doctor, and it nearly destroyed me. I couldn’t believe what I had done. Sometimes

now... It was me that made Cole get Sheriff. It was me that begged to be punished. And it was him, that fat useless carcass, who wouldn't let me.

'He knew, do you understand? He knew that no matter what I had done, Heritage didn't deserve to be punished with me. He understood what my work would mean, better than any of us.

Better than the Heyworths ever did.'

The Doctor frowned, his thick eyebrows sinking to hide the colour of his eyes. All that could be seen were his pupils, two pinpricks of darkness drinking in the light.

'You lied to them,' he growled.

'They came to *me*,' Wakeling countered angrily. 'They wanted a child, so I gave them one. They didn't care for the details, the consequences, so I didn't bother them. I needed a test subject and they offered. They offered! They came to *me*!'

'You needed an incubator for your clone.'

'They wanted a child. Heyworth's wife had a rare medical condition – a menopause – that left her infertile. But she still wanted children. They were both still desperate for a child, and my research was just at the stage where I was going to create one. So I cloned her.

'But they weren't happy. They wanted a child – mother and father combined – not a clone, not a copy of one but a mingling of both. But what use would that be to me? Man has been creating life that way for millennia; I was creating the first of a new breed.'

The Doctor took a step forward, over Sheriff's bleeding body. The casualties always get left behind, forgotten.

Eventually, you just have to get on with it and face the living.

Move on, step past, forget. He'd done it a thousand times before. He'd done it with Mel, and would eventually do it with...

'And when she found out, she came here, and you argued,'

the Doctor intoned, Wakeling pausing to hear the words fall. His eyes clouded as he looked back, elsewhere, to other times. 'And when you argued, you killed her.'

A silence then.

Nothing moved, for a moment.

And then Wakeling lifted his head, to reveal his face. His mouth was thin and tight, his glasses sliding halfway down his nose. He reached up with a single finger and pushed them back into place. His eyes were cold and hard as he looked down at the little stranger, the thorn spiking into his delicate flesh. The man who had just ruined what was meant to be the greatest day the universe had ever seen. The short-sighted little man who couldn't see past one little mistake.

'Yes,' Wakeling agreed calmly, 'I murdered her. I've had a long time to come to terms with that, Doctor, and I know what I am. I'm a genius.'

The Doctor smiled thinly.

'You're nothing,' he said softly.

But Wakeling merely shook his head.

'There are plenty of other planets, Doctor. Plenty of deadbeat, dead end backwaters that I could go to. Start afresh.

I've done it before. I came here; I can go elsewhere.'

'You can't escape, Wakeling,' the Doctor said slowly. Not a threat, not a grand declaration, just a simple soft statement of fact, delicately delivered.

'Yes I can. I just need to make sure you don't follow me,'

Wakeling smiled, thinly.

He turned to Bernard who was still hovering in the kitchen, his eyes dark and murderous.

'Kill him, Bernard,' the professor said.

Somehow, Bernard understood. Two bullets clicked into the chambers beneath his belly. The Doctor turned, and fixed the dolphin with a cold glare. Kill me, his slate grey eyes said, and I promise you you'll regret it. Puncture this fragile skin, and all the demons in hell will come pouring out. Somehow, the look didn't translate; Bernard saw only another victim, waiting to bleed. His walker took a step forward.

Suddenly, the air was filled with a ragged hissing.

From the dark corners of the room – from every shadow, every crack on the walls and floor – a red cloud started to fill the air. It seemed to expand as it poured into the little room, doubling and redoubling in size until there was no air, just fine red dust. Bernard's first instinct told him he was being gassed, and he tripped round trying to find its source. Then he realised it was nothing, a harmless diversion, but by then it was too late.

The shots rang out, but in his surprise Bernard pulled his aim and the two bullets sailed harmlessly over the Doctor's head.

They embedded themselves into the heavy material of the ceiling, perhaps continuing and rattling through the rooms above.

Wakeling opened his mouth to shout, but all he could do was cough as the red dust invaded his throat and lungs. It was blood, thin and loaded with iron, the air as dark and red as the stain on the floor. Blood seeped so deep on Heritage, it stained the ground and the air before it even hit the lungs.

The Doctor didn't seem surprised by his rescue in the slightest. He just doffed his hat to the mass of Fussies gathered around the edge of the room, and strolled casually out of the building. The Fussies themselves continued to blow out their dinner of dust into the air for a few moments longer before eventually fading away into the woodwork themselves. They vanished so completely, it was as if they too were made of nothing but sand and dust.

Bernard and Wakeling were left alone then, waiting for the dust to settle.

'You're getting old,' Ed growled, a manic leer on his face as he advanced.

His lip was cut, but aside from that there was no sign that Cole had landed any blows on the young man at all. His lip bled, though; blood drip-drip-dropped from it, swallowed greedily by the hungry earth below. He ran the back of his hand across his mouth, still grinning. His lank hair was plastered to his neck now, straggly and thin as it ran up the back of his head to disappear into the severe buzz-cut. His fists were raised, the blood on them not his own, but evidence of the damage he had inflicted on Cole. The big Geordie's left eye was blackened and swollen, and his nose flattened to his face, held in place only by dried blood.

Cole's eyes were dark still, and focused in on his opponent.

‘Aye,’ he said conversationally. ‘Too old to waste my time on scrawn like you.’

And with that, he flicked his arm up, casually dismissing the younger man. The metal arm glistened in the moonlight as it scythed through the air, slicing the night in two. The three stubby fingers and the thick box-like hand caught Ed a clean blow under the chin, sending his round head flicking backwards and lifting his feet off the dust. The young man pedalled air for a few seconds, before landing flat on his back in a cloud of red dust. He lay there, blinking, dazed. Defeated.

‘And I never felt a thing,’ Cole said to himself triumphantly.

But he still rubbed his hand awkwardly, as if to warm it.

‘Having fun?’ came a voice from behind him.

Cole turned, the smile widening on his face. Up above, the Doctor was sitting astride Sheriff’s horse, his umbrella all wrapped up in the reins. Cole tried to remember when Sheriff had turned up – he couldn’t; must have been during the boxing match with Ed. He hadn’t tried to stop them. Perhaps he’d grown sick of the child’s grip on the town too. Perhaps he knew how liberated Cole would feel after landing just one blow.

Perhaps he knew how quickly Ed would begin to stir again, and that the little lad could take care of himself.

‘Aye,’ Cole said cheerfully. ‘Are we done?’

The Doctor nodded solemnly.

‘But I don’t think Professor Wakeling is too keen to see us go,’ he said, only a hint of a smile in his eyes.

Cole nodded, and without a word he reached up and hauled himself onto Sheriff’s horse behind the Doctor. He held tight with his knees, and held the dark brown coat tight with his thick fingers. Then the Doctor whispered something in the horse’s ear, and it kicked its legs high and galloped off between the two moons. Within seconds, there was nothing left to see but a cloud of dust, catching the moonlight as it rained down to the earth.

Until Christa galloped up on a horse moments later.

Lee closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind. It should have been

easy; the cavern was empty now, and so far beneath the earth that the only sound was the slow echo of water hitting the rocks. The light in the cavern was dull, a pale organic blue, but somehow it burnt through his eyelids and strained the eyes beneath. The noise was like a constant hiss of static in his ears –

no, between them in the base of his brain. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Ryan's face smiling back at him, from the photographs in their home.

When he opened them, all he could see were yellowing bones, interlaced.

He could remember when they'd first arrived on Heritage, lugging across heavy mining equipment whilst they waited for Sale to bring the desalination plant on-line. Using drillers and shakers to carve these tunnels out of the tough heart of Heritage, feeding the rubble into the makers to transform it into plasticrete and other building materials. They'd used the dead bones of the planet to build up their new homes, didn't stop to think of the consequences. Didn't think what a town made of dead flesh and dried remains could ever hope to achieve.

Looking back, Lee supposed it was inevitable. They were made of dust, and all they could ever hope to be was dust. Dead and dry dust.

But perhaps like Ryan's tomb, it was time they were reclaimed. Perhaps the earth should let its hungry maw open wide and swallow the whole town back, closing its teeth tight on dust, bone and death. Taking back what was its, by rights. Ashes to ashes, and... You could let things drag on too long, let the will keep pushing a body along that had died centuries before. But eventually, it would get you. Eventually, what you were would seek you out, and you would have to make amends. Once the will was gone, what then, what then?

Lee sat in the darkness, his thumb toying casually on the inset detonator of one of his sticks of dynamite. He hadn't brought them down there, into the dark, deliberately. Hadn't even remembered them until the earth started growling. But now, here he was, looking at Ryan's sad remains, and suddenly it seemed like it was meant to be right from the start. Something in him had made him forget. Something had known that once he was in the darkness where he belonged, the explosives would be needed. One last time.

Lee sat in the dark, his eyes closed, and hung on desperately to that

stick of dynamite.

But still his thumb didn't press the detonator.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

6. August, 6048 CE

18:29

Ace slipped from the horse easily, her feet landing so softly on the ground that they barely disturbed the dust. Instead, they sunk in a little, the thin red sand starting to eat away at her shiny black Docs. Only they weren't shiny black any more; they were dusty, covered in a sheen of red like everything else on this planet. It was working its way into even her, grinding her down, making her gears seize up and stop.

She turned then, and held her arms out to Sweetness. The little girl barely blinked, just leapt from the back of the horse and into Ace's waiting grasp. Ace didn't even take a step back – the girl seemed lighter than air, as if she too were merely dust – but instead let her arms close tight around the girl's body. She could smell the dust in her copper hair, feel the gentle rhythm of her heart keeping time in her chest.

Ace's own heart skipped too, and she quickly set the little girl down on the ground.

Little Sweetness looked up at her, eyes all wide and blue, a kiss-curl of orange falling across her forehead. Looking at her, Ace couldn't see a trace of the ordeal the little girl must have been through, the torment of losing not just a father but a mother as well. Ace couldn't imagine what that would be like, a young girl raised by a surrogate father alone. Not to mention that her new father was her parents' murderer; how would that scar her, she wondered? What kind of woman would Sweetness grow into, with her roots sunk deep into such bitter soil?

So Ace felt for her. So she wanted to take care of her, put her arms around her and tell her that it would be alright. Not just say it, not just chew the words, but get out there and make it happen. Punish the wicked. Protect the innocent. That didn't mean she was going soft, didn't mean she'd be cooking dinners and darning socks before the week was out. It just meant that she knew wrong from right, and wasn't willing to let evil win.

Not this time, at least.

And if little Sweetness reminded Ace of herself, well that was only to be expected. After all, they had both lost their parents.

Ace had never really known her father before he'd left them, and her mother... well her mother had stayed, but every day the gulf between them had grown wider until there was no getting over it, no matter how hard they tried. Ace had used to blame her mother for that – blamed her for not reaching out across the No Man's Land between them to offer her love, her approval – but recently she'd begun to question even that established truth.

After all, she hadn't reached out to her mother, either.

Soon all there had been to hold them together was the outside world, its rules and its disapproval. Nice little girls didn't set incendiaries, didn't play with explosives as if they were dolls, and good mothers certainly didn't let them. Her mother hadn't tried to see what Ace had seen in them, too terrified by the prying eyes of the world out there. Police, social workers, judges.

She'd come down hard, favouring the rod rather than spoil the child. It had been pushing back against that that had made Ace grow up into the girl she was. If she hadn't met the Doctor, if she hadn't become so embroiled in his plots and planning, who would she be now? The same girl? The same bolshy, gutsy crusader? Somehow, she doubted it; the world had a much different fate in store for her, back home.

Whatever happened to her out here, she could at least be thankful that the Doctor had saved her from that. From herself.

Ace reached out with a finger, and gently flicked Sweetness's nose.

'It'll be alright,' she said gently.

Sweetness just looked at her, unmoved.

Ace tried not to take it personally, as she tied the horse's reins to an overhanging branch of a tree so blue it was almost black. She didn't recognise the species, but it wouldn't be the first alien she'd accepted help from without knowing where they came from. More than anything, it was a landmark, out here where the only thing to see was folds of thin red sand drifting over the horizon. Even by the pale moonlight, Ace had been able to pick the tree out almost as far away as Heritage. She'd kept it in her sights all the way out here, knowing that it would lead her straight to her goal.



Looking past the tree, Ace could see the burnt-out wreck that had once been the Heyworth farm. That had once been little Sweetness's home. She looked back at the little girl, trying to search out some trace of bad memories in her eyes. Just something to show the ghosts were still haunting her. But there was nothing; the little girl was staring intently off in some other direction, squinting into the moonlight. Perhaps it was too long ago for her to remember. A lifetime ago.

Still, Ace couldn't take her eyes from it. It affected *her* – the ghost that haunted it touched *her* soul, casting shivers and shadows wherever they touched. Perhaps that was why they left Sweetness alone, because Ace's soul was so much more like theirs; dark, tormented.

She had seen burnt-out houses before. Had caused some of them. She still couldn't look at them without thinking of skeletons stripped of their flesh, and livid red scars that wouldn't fade with time. She could picture herself in there too easily, breathing in thick black smoke as burning flames licked at her and fed. Choking on the smoke as she tried to call out the Doctor's name, begging him to save her one last time.

Because he wouldn't let that happen to her.

She was special; she travelled with him.

Ace closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them again, she was calmer, resolute. She had a job to do, and until it was done there was no time to be thinking about anything else. The Doctor had left his instructions, and it was up to her to follow them. After all, if he couldn't trust in the Ace in his hand, then who else could he trust? No one, that was who.

She was his loyal foot-soldier, and she would do anything for him, if he asked. Even die.

Wouldn't she?

Ace turned; Sweetness was still staring off into the darkness, her eyes fixed on something in the sand that Ace couldn't quite make out. She placed a hand on the girl's shoulder, firm but caring. She looked up again, china-doll eyes almost breaking Ace's heart.

'Stay with me, Sweetness,' she said softly. 'The Doctor'll be here soon. He'll sort everything out. Just stay near me, okay?'

But Ace didn't look down at the child as she spoke. Instead her eyes

were set on the distance, out over her curled hair.

Following the hoofprints in the sand as they snaked back towards the town. There wasn't much of a wind tonight; nothing would disturb the tracks, leaving a clear marker for anyone who wanted to follow them. Not that that was what was bothering Ace. Not that that was really what she was looking at.

No, she was looking at the dust cloud in the distance, heavy and red.

Red dust thrown into the air by the thunder of approaching horses.

Someone was coming.

Doctor?

Wakeling rode the horse with dignity, his body held poised and erect. He paused for a moment, cool eyes scanning the horizon for any sign of life, and in that one moment he looked like one of the kings of yore. Leading his troops into battle, protecting the nation from those who would do her harm. Perhaps when he took his discovery to some new town, the people there would make him a crown of burnished gold and offer themselves to his rule. Or perhaps he should swoop in on them like a dragon, demanding tribute.

He was not a vain man, you had to understand. He did what he did for the benefit of science and mankind alone, not for riches or reward. But that night, perched high in the saddle, he wished he could make his announcement there and then, in his own name. Have it burnt across the universe in the very stars, just so that Heritage would forever be reminded of what they had lost, what they had allowed a fat bumbling sheriff and a little grey-eyed stranger to take from them.

But that was for later. First, the Doctor had to be found.

Found and stopped.

A moment later, Wakeling's troops fell into place. Bernard slid his walker to a halt, dwarfed by Wakeling's powerful steed.

The dolphin looked up, his sleek face still showing its mockery of a smile as he chittered away in his own screeching language. It was obvious he had no idea of what was going on, but once the prey had been found Wakeling was sure his predatory instincts would be awoken. Behind Bernard, Christa scowled to a halt on the last of the stolen horses, Ed holding tight to her waist. The young man had a

vicious bruise forming over his right eye, and his cheek appeared a little more sunken than was usual.

Obviously he had a score to settle, and his woman was only too keen to accommodate him.

Wakeling gave a little sigh, just to himself. It hurt to see just how low he had been forced, to know that the only people he could inspire to action were criminals and misfits. Needless to say, this chapter would be left blank once history required a biography.

‘Over there,’ Christa was saying, a steel in her voice that usually arrived when anyone had wronged her man. ‘They’re heading for the farm.’

Wakeling didn’t even acknowledge her.

‘The Doctor’s mine,’ he breathed.

Then he spurred his borrowed horse, and shot across the

’Flats again.

Cole didn’t have much time to think any more. As soon as he’d leapt onto the Doctor’s horse, his brain had been left behind, blown out of his ears by the rushing wind. He could feel the night racing by, stroking his shaven head, kissing his dry lips. It was hard not to let out a whoop of joy as they rode, chasing down the moons; there wasn’t anything they couldn’t do now, nowhere they couldn’t go. He had been offered his life back, and he’d snatched at it with three metal-pronged fingers. He barely even noticed how much his backside was beginning to ache as the horse’s back pounded up into it with every step.

The Doctor was less enlivened, Cole realised as they rode.

The little man could have been carved out of granite for all the expression he let out; the only movement he gave was a little jig-jog up and down in time with the falling of the horse’s feet. His dark coat was spraying out behind him in the wind of their escape, his hat somehow still firmly attached to his bristling hair as if glued there. His umbrella was clutched firmly in his hand, even though it had clearly seen better days. Cole might have said something then, but the Doctor beat him to it.

‘Look behind us,’ he shouted over his shoulder, not taking his eyes

from the ground ahead.

Cole turned. A few hundred metres behind them was a thick cloud of red dust, the silhouettes of two large horses racing out of it as if terrified they would be eaten. He couldn't make out the shapes of the riders, but then he didn't really need to. He should have known they'd be followed, should have known escape wouldn't be so easy. But somehow, the knowledge didn't inspire the feelings of terror it should have. For some crazy reason, he was actually pleased that he'd get a chance to show Wakeling what he thought of him. Even if it killed him.

'What do we do, Doctor?' he asked, shouting over the rush of the wind.

A pause then, as the Doctor considered.

'I'm going to slow down a little up here,' he announced finally. 'You'll have to jump off. Try and find Ace – she should be at the Heyworth farm. Get her and Sweetness back to your bar and put a call through to the Adjudicators. Then keep them safe until I get back there.'

'And you?'

'I'll keep riding. Hopefully, I'll be able to draw them away from you, for a little while.'

Cole nodded, even though the Doctor couldn't see.

'Okay, Doctor,' he added.

Another pause, this time more hesitant.

'Cole?'

'Doctor?'

'I'm trusting you to take care of them. Especially Ace. Do you understand?'

Cole felt his chest swell.

'Aye, I get you, Doctor. You can trust us.'

'Thank you,' said the Doctor.

And so they raced on.

Christa bore the horse down, hard; her hands flicked the reins constantly as her heels dug deep into its flank. Its mouth was flecked with spittle, its eyes wide as it thundered on trying to please its rider. No matter how hard she pushed it, though, she wasn't satisfied. Wakeling's horse was still pulling ahead, following the Doctor's tracks onto the 'Flats. He would still get to them first. He would exact his revenge. That couldn't be allowed to happen.

Cole had hit Ed – her Ed – and spoilt his perfect face. If anyone was going to exact revenge, it would be her. Cole would see just how much she loved her man.

Christa tried to remember what life had been like, before Ed.

It was hard. Back then, things were dark and fuzzy, made indistinct by years of happiness piled on top of them. She remembered being pulled from planet to planet, constantly trying to start a new life... or recreate an old one? She knew that she had been alone back then, no one who understood what she was going through, no one who cared. It had made her grow up cold, an icy shell pulled around her to protect the soft warmth inside.

For years, her only dreams were that she would stay that way forever, no one ever breaching her perfect defences.

Then there was Ed.

From the moment their two families had been imperfectly fused, the two of them had been the strongest bond that held everything else in place. He had echoed her, complemented her.

Separated by light years, they had lived the same life. Everything that she had gone through – alone – he had felt too, his heart so finely attuned it had felt her pain across the universe. Once they came together, there was nothing that would keep them apart.

Christa's ice-shell had opened, briefly, to let him and no one else inside, then closed again. To the rest of the world, she was a hard-faced bitch – she knew it, and didn't care. As long as Ed knew her secrets.

To have him near, to feel his arms pulled taut around her, to feel his body as the horse's motion jiggled it up and down against her. Even to feel his stubble and moustache spike her face when they kissed. This was a kind of ecstasy, a burning desire smouldering through her anger, her desire for revenge. In the darkness, in his arms, she'd

whisper to him all the things she couldn't say in daylight. Things she could never say to anybody else. She loved him, and always would. She'd die for him. She'd kill for him.

As Cole was about to find out.

If only this damned horse would get its act together and *run*!

Christa gritted her teeth and squinted as the night tried its best to freeze her eyes. She could see Wakeling charging away ahead, his horse's hooves destroying any trace of the Doctor's tracks as it chewed up the sand. Even Bernard was ahead of them, his walker chattering to itself as the dolphin pushed its way beyond the safety parameters. She imagined she could see smoke rising from the joints, hear the dust beginning to clog the vapour release valves. If he kept pushing it like that, perhaps he'd burst into flames; char-grilled dolphin all round.

Bernard paused for a moment, and then broke away from the tracks followed by Wakeling.

Just what was the crazy fish up to?

It didn't take Christa long to find out what; as her horse tore across the 'Flats, she was soon at the point where Bernard had veered off. She pulled her horse up short, pulling back so hard on the reins that the lumbering beast reared up on its hind legs in protest. She dug her feet in deeper, just to let it know who was in charge here, and then leant over in the saddle to examine the broken ground. Ed put his hands round her waist as the horse panted, at least grateful that the mad charge was over, if only for a moment.

'What's up?' Ed asked, all too anxious to resume pursuit. If Christa wanted to punish Cole for hurting her baby, then Ed wanted just as much to punish for showing that he could be hurt. His pride was more tattered and worn than his beautiful face. 'Why've we stopped?'

'Shh,' breathed Christa huskily. She felt his grip grow tighter around her waist.

He might be her only, but that didn't mean she wouldn't use her feminine wiles against him.

When she needed to.

She looked down at the ground, and saw where Wakeling's horse had eaten over the Doctor's tracks. Just a little further off

– a metre, maybe more, in the direction Bernard had suddenly taken – she could see other tracks, footprints digging up the dry sand and spreading it as somebody ran headlong across the desert. Somebody too big to be the Doctor – a childhood spent on Heritage had taught her one useful thing at least, and that was how to read tracks in the dust. When there was no TV, you'd be surprised what you'd do for entertainment.

Cole had jumped the Doctor's horse, and ran on foot across the 'Flats. Lost his nerve for standing up to the natural order, perhaps. It wouldn't do him any good; Bernard was a sharp little bastard. And Christa and Ed wouldn't be far behind – the Doctor be damned, it was Cole she had a score to settle with.

Digging her heels deep, Christa spurred her horse on again.

In tireless pursuit.

Ace stood and hugged close to the tree, away from everything, safe. Sweetness was in her arms, pulled in close to her, wrapped up tight. Nothing would reach her here. Nothing would get either of them. Ace knew that for a fact; from where she was hiding, she had a panoramic view of everything that took place in the desert plains. To her left, the Doctor and Wakeling tantalisingly close, to her, to each other; to her right Cole hopelessly outrun by Bernard and his machine, and behind him the terrible twins on horseback closing in.

Three against one didn't seem like very fair odds, but at least Sweetness was safe.

Both of them, safe and sound, miles from the action.

As Ace watched, she saw Bernard catch up with Cole, and nudge him roughly with his snout. Running at full pelt, even so brief a touch was enough to throw the barman off balance and sprawling into the sand. The sound didn't carry that far, but Ace was convinced she could hear the bullets falling into their chambers regardless. The dolphin twitched his head briefly, letting the moonlight catch on his sharp little teeth. There was no way he could have seen them from that distance, but Ace pulled Sweetness back into the trees' shadows anyway. Anything rather than be seen. Than to have to get involved and fight.

The sound of the shot rang out across the plains.

It echoed through Ace, all down her body.

She watched as Cole twitched and fell into the sand, the earth's shadows swallowing his body whole, leaving nothing but a blackness. Ace felt her heart pause, frozen for an instant. She could see the dolphin pacing forwards as Ed and Christa drew closer on their horse; there didn't seem to be anything anybody could do. The whole thing was hopeless, the battle already lost.

Then there was a twitch, and Cole rose back up out of the ground.

She watched as the moonlight figure squared up to its three attackers. There was no way he could even hope to win, especially if Bernard's pistols were still working. They hadn't fired again – not yet – but that didn't necessarily mean they had fallen victim to the dust; the dolphin could just be choosing his moment, allowing Cole to savour the flavours of his own approaching death. Perhaps she was fooling herself, but Ace thought she could taste it too – blood in the air. It set her heart racing, her skin tingling.

Ace looked down at Sweetness. The little girl was still staring into the distance, a strange look on her face. She certainly didn't look like she was considering moving any time soon. Ace's head whipped left then right, her pony-tail flailing into the wind.

There was nothing around that might do the little girl harm, unless either the Doctor or Cole let their attackers get past them.

The Doctor was old enough and ugly enough to look after himself, but Cole... Three against one really wasn't good odds.

Much better two against three.

Ace pulled Sweetness around to look into her eyes.

'You've got to stay here, okay?' she said insistently. 'I mean don't move for anything until me or the Doctor come back, okay? I won't be long, I promise. Okay?'

Ace stared at her for a moment.

Nothing.

And then the little girl nodded, slowly.

Ace barely had time to smile her appreciation at the little girl before she had the reins in her hand, whipping them out of their knot with a single tug and leaping onto the horse's back in one fluid motion. Her



heels tapped lightly against the horse's flank, and she let out a growling whoop as her steed whinnied and threw itself into a gallop. Seconds later, she was nothing but a cloud of dust and the echo of hooves.

Sweetness didn't seem to mind. She spent roughly a second clinging to the tree, watching her protector disappear, before she smiled thinly and began to walk. It took only a moment, and then she was there, stood over the object. She had spotted it the moment she had arrived in the desert, its dulled skin glinting in the pale moons' light. It was stubby and solid and hefty, half buried in the thin sand where someone had thrown it who knew how many years ago.

Sweetness bent down and picked it up, turning it over in her hands. She stared at it, as if waiting for it to whisper its secrets, its history. As if she could read in its dusty skin its adventures of the previous night, see Sheriff's tears staining the shiny surface.

Or perhaps it was too dulled by a crusty layer of rust and some dark substance.

The girl's smile faded.

Down in the darkness, sat under metres on metres of loose dry sand, only held in place by a few plasticrete beams and the arrogance of humankind, sat Lee. One of his thick hands was resting lightly on the yellowing bones welded into place in front of him. The other caressed the detonator of his last stick of dynamite gently, stroking back and forth across it. His eyes were closed, tight, the pictures he saw no one's but his.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

6. August, 6048 CE

18:34

*' Sir Lee Marks – head of the El ershaw Foundation, the system's largest charitable organisation – has died today in a fire at his off-planet home.*

*Documents received by his staff indicate that the fire was started deliberately.*

*Three of the directors of the Ellershaw Foundation have already filed to be appointed Sir Marks' successor. Now, over to Tammy on the waterbed. '*

The News, in Graphic Detail,

Channel 12,

8. December, 6064 CE.

Bernard stood over Cole, watching as he struggled to comprehend the fact that he was still alive. For all the faults of his ill formed, misshapen Cetacean body, it still gave him a certain amount of pride to know that it could still overcome the resistance offered by a real human. If you could honour Cole with such a description; could someone as blind, as disloyal as him ever *really* be called a human? No, and yet it was people like him that were blessed from birth. It was enough to make Bernard sick, really it was.

Cole pulled himself to his feet, just as the horse pulled to a stop behind the dolphin.

Bernard turned, and saw Ed and Christa wrapped in each other on the horse's back. He flashed his teeth at them, and blinked his dark little eyes.

'Leave him to me,' he said. It came out as a semaphore of high-pitched squeals.

Christa was the first to drop from the horse.

'Come on then,' Cole said flatly. 'Come on. I don't care any more. You can kill me if you want. But I didn't give in. At least I know that.'

'I hope it's a comfort,' Christa purred softly, 'when I'm making you eat your liver.'

But to Bernard, the whole exchange was nothing but the grunting of apes.

There was one thing he could recognise, though; his underlings were trying to usurp his place in the natural order of things. They were trying to get the first bite of a prey that was rightfully his, to topple the alpha male from his position of dominance. Perhaps it was because his translator was out, because he was feeling less than human, but that gave rise to all sorts of emotions, all sorts of instincts. All the kinds of things he usually hated about himself, but just this once, just this one time... Bernard gave in to his instincts, and dived forwards, tail flicking, teeth gnashing.

He dived straight for Cole, his eyes dark.

Cole looked for a moment, then closed his eyes.

He held his arms wide, ready to embrace...

There was a thunder of hooves, the dull thud as they impacted against the loose sand echoing the pounding of the dolphin's heart. Just before Bernard's teeth could tear at the barman's neck, eat his life right out of his throat, came salvation.

Ace roared by on horseback, diving from the saddle in a fluid pounce and catching Cole's body in her arms. The momentum of her dive tore him from where he stood and pulled him rolling into the red dust, out of Bernard's murderous path. But the dolphin was rushing too fast to stop, and his steel-framed walker charged straight for Ed and Christa's horse. The animal reared, throwing Ed from his seat and leaving Christa fighting to control it. Ed and Bernard ended up rolling in the thin red dirt, the mirror of Ace and Cole.

'Next time,' Cole's rescuer said, the words meaningless to dolphin ears, 'it's okay to get out of the way.'

Cole's heart pounded. Electric relief flooded his body, but some small part of him was still disappointed. The small part that knew he deserved to die, for everything he had done and allowed to be done, a long time ago.

Ace towered over him, and offered a hand to pull the Geordie to his feet.

Metal fingers were grasped by warm flesh.

The two of them turned, and saw Bernard, Ed and Christa still on horseback, all lined up and glaring at them. Cole looked at Ace, standing firm by his side. Everybody but him looked like they were ready to kill to get what they wanted. Everybody but him looked like they were ready for what was to come. His stomach growled angrily. He'd come here to find himself, to prove himself, to settle at something and stick with it for once in his life. Now all he wanted to do was run away, again.

'Ready?' Ace asked, her voice barely a hiss.

'Ready,' Cole answered, surprised at how calm he sounded.

Ace turned to the wall of intent staring them down.

‘Three against two? No chance,’ she yelled. ‘You sure you don’t need some more help?’

The young girl twisted as she spoke, easing her rucksack into the sand. Her muscles rippled under her jacket; no matter how much of a child she was, she was more used to fighting than Cole. She looked like she could handle herself.

Could she handle Bernard and his kids, though?

‘Just shut up and fight,’ Christa yelled, and dug in her heels.

The horse reared and charged forwards. Bernard flashed his teeth and snarled and ran. Ed let out a whoop, letting his hat fall to the dust before breaking into a sprint. There didn’t seem to be any grand strategy – just to plough in and battle. Cole glanced at Ace – she had planted a foot firm behind her, bracing for impact. Cole copied her, and hoped he didn’t look too blatant. If they ever heard about this back home, he’d be laughed out of town.

Bernard connected first, his snout pushing between Ace’s breasts and just stopping his teeth from tasting flesh. She grabbed onto his walker even as it pulled her off her feet, leaving her swinging on the front of it like some kind of hunting trophy.

It was clear that she hoped her added weight would cause the machine to over-balance, leaving its rider vulnerable. Who knew

– perhaps it would work, too. Trouble was, Cole had other things on his mind; Christa seemed to be more interested in him than Ace, and a solid kick landed on his shoulders as she rode up behind him. He couldn’t even keep standing as the kick landed; his knees buckled and he ended up eating dirt. All he could think as he hit the ground was to wonder where Ed had got to.

Hooves began to dance down around him as Christa tried to make the horse stamp on Cole’s head as he rolled on the ground.

The horse was unwilling to tread on him, but it was getting pretty agitated under Christa’s urging; sooner or later a hoof was going to hit whether it meant to or not. Cole tried rolling away, but Christa had expected that. The horse followed his every move, snorting and wide-eyed, perhaps more panicked than Cole himself.

As he rolled, Cole caught a glimpse of Ed. He was chasing Ace's horse, obviously hoping to bring its might into the fray.

A thick brown leg caught against Cole's head, leaving him seeing stars for a moment.

If Christa had taken that moment to press home her advantage, Cole would have had it. If she had jumped from the horse and used that blade she always carried around with her, there would have been nothing Cole could have done but bleed.

But she didn't; instead, she laughed maniacally, obviously enjoying her game of horse and mouse. Thing was, the horse wasn't enjoying it that much itself. Instead of letting a heavy hoof fall on Cole's thin skull, the horse spat foam and reared up.

This time there was nothing its rider could do; Christa was thrown from the saddle to land face down in the dust.

Cole shook his head and tried to pull himself to his feet.

Somehow, his legs didn't seem to be working any more. He could see Ace, thrown from the front of Bernard's walker but clutching a small rubber tube as a prize. Her face and hair were wet, water leaking from the silver machine only to be drunk greedily by the parched earth. Ed was still trying to convince the horse to let him take its reins, but the sound of Christa's horse screaming had made it skittish. It danced and tossed its head, scuttling backwards as if it had forgotten how to turn. Ed wasn't helping to calm it much, instead making frantic grabs for the dangling reins and swearing loudly as he missed them.

Perhaps it was because he was the first looking, but Cole saw what was happening long before anybody else. The horse took another skittish step backwards, its eyes still locked on Ed. Its back hooves hit the ground hard, broke through it. The dry ground opened its mouth wide, and began to swallow the horse's legs.

The horse let out a terrified scream, and everybody looked then.

Its back legs were sunken already up to the fetlocks, its front legs frantically scrabbling at the loose earth to try to gain purchase, desperate to escape its fate. Ed had two choices: jump back and save himself; not accept defeat. His hands flashed out and grabbed hold of the reins as the horse tossed its head, frothy spittle flying everywhere. He grabbed hard and pulled, foolishly trying to pull the horse free. Perhaps he wanted to save it, perhaps he merely wanted to put it to

use in the coming battle.

Whichever, his efforts were doomed to failure.

‘Ed!’ Christa screamed, scrabbling across the sand to reach him, Cole all but forgotten.

Her shawl came loose as she crawled, stretched out across the dry sands. The red dust crept up through the open crochet and began to swallow the wool, slowly. A gentle breeze helped the dust to claim it, and within moments it was little more than a dark patch in the red desert sands.

The horse gave a final pathetic whinny as its body broke through, and then its head disappeared from view. Its screams echoed briefly, and then there was the echo of an impact and a raw snap. It had landed hard on the rocks beneath the planet’s skin, its back broken. It had died instantly, if it was lucky. Cole tried not to think about it, tried to turn his head in disgust. But he couldn’t; he had to watch as Ed swayed on the brink of the pit.

As soon as it was clear that he couldn’t pull the horse free, he had let go of the reins. But by then it was too late. He was already too close, already pulled off his balance. As he teetered on the edge, the ground beneath his feet began to crumble away, grain by grain. Christa was mere inches away from him, her feet pedalling frantically, churning the sand more than they provided traction. Her fingers brushed against his as he turned. Then the earth finally gave way.

‘Shit!’ he said, before he fell.

And Christa grabbed frantically at his hands as her love fell into the dark earth.

Grabbed and held.

Cole shook himself, pulling himself up to his knees, staring in disbelief. Christa was laid out flat across the sand, her hands reaching down into the impenetrable darkness of the gaping wound, Ed’s heavy dry hands clasping hard at her wrists. At any moment he expected the earth to continue its slow crumbling and the two of them to disappear from sight. But it didn’t. It held, and so did they. But she couldn’t pull herself back. All she could do was delay Ed’s fall, not stop it, not save him.

‘Don’t you let go,’ she hissed at her love, her face contorted as she

struggled to hold him.

Cole felt cool hands grab at his waist, pulling him to his feet.

‘Come on,’ said Ace firmly. ‘We’ve got to help them.’

But Cole didn’t move, not immediately.

‘Hang on,’ he said, but got no further.

Both he and Ace were flattened suddenly, bowled to the ground as something sleek and fast dived between them. As Cole fell, he felt a thick flipper clout him behind the ears, making stars burst afresh before his eyes. He saw Ace dive into the dust, and roll as she fell so that even before the attack had finished she was on her feet ready to face the follow up. So that was what a real fighter should do. Cole wasn’t a real fighter – it was all he could do to roll in the dirt, to look up at the moons. Still he struggled back to his feet, swaying slightly. He wasn’t cut out for this kind of punishment.

Bernard stood between them and Christa, his sharp teeth glinting in the moonlight.

He snickered at them, his voice nothing but clicks and claks.

‘Listen, mush,’ Ace said, firm but calm, ‘we just want to help your friends, okay? Let us by, so we can stop them dying. Right?’

But the dolphin didn’t move.

‘He can’t understand,’ Cole said softly. ‘His translator’s not working.’

Bernard snickered again, twitching his head so that his little black eyes fell on Christa stretched out and desperate on the red sand. She didn’t look back, frantically talking at Ed in a half undertone. The pale light of the two moons was enough to see that the red dust she was lying on was beginning to crack and crumble. A thin trail of sand trickled down, probably dusting Ed’s shaved head and sticking to the lank hair running down his neck.

Bernard turned back to Ace and Cole, his teeth bared.

‘He understands alright,’ Ace said grimly. ‘He just doesn’t care.’

They stood, and waited for the inevitable charge.

Lee sat in the darkness, one hand on Ryan’s, the other clutching the

stick of dynamite close to his chest. His finger toyed with the detonator switch. Circled it slowly, caressing it, teasing it. Then, finally, deliciously, he stabbed at the button. It clicked home, and the stick began to vibrate slowly. Somewhere, a warning light flashed, but Lee didn't see it. His eyes were closed.

'I'm sorry,' he breathed, softly, sadly.

In his head, he heard a sigh.

'Now what did you do that for?' Ryan asked, a memory of his voice dredged up from deep inside. 'What exactly are you trying to prove with this little gesture, hmm?'

It occurred to Lee then that he really didn't have an answer.

Except perhaps that it was just too difficult to go on hating himself for what he had done.

What he had made Ryan do.

'Then perhaps you could try forgiving yourself?' Ryan's ghost suggested.

Without even realising he was doing it, Lee opened his eyes.

He was still holding the dynamite close to his chest, the vibration building higher and faster. Grasping the stick with both hands, he gave it a vicious twist; it couldn't be defused but he could at least engage the timer. Give himself enough time to run. He only paused long enough then to kiss the bones of Ryan's hand gently, and close the bony fingers tight around the dynamite.

Then he ran, not caring where to.

Just into the darkness.

When Wakeling finally caught up with the Doctor, the little stranger had stopped running. His horse was standing there, tied to the branches of a nearby tree, calmly nosing the ground as if it expected to find a handful of horsefeed growing out of the dead earth. The Doctor wasn't standing with his horse, though. No, he was a little further by, inside the grounds of the farm. He was standing with his back to the 'Flats, looking up at the burnt-out wreck of the Heyworth farm. It stood there, blackened and melted, a monument to something that no one really wanted to remember.



Of course, it would be here, of all places, thought Wakeling as he dropped from the saddle.

His horse trotted over to join its fellow in the fruitless search, glad of the opportunity to rest after the long hard gallop.

There was no sign of Cole, but Wakeling hadn't really expected to see him again. He'd either chickened out and rabbitted, or else he was trying to stir up trouble elsewhere. Either way, he was easily dealt with, later. No, the important thing now was to neutralise the threat the Doctor posed. After that, everything else would slot easily back into place.

The little man didn't even turn as Wakeling crept up, just asked:

'Are you proud of it?'

The tattered umbrella came up, pointing at the burnt-out house, but Wakeling didn't need directing. He knew what the stranger was talking about. But he wouldn't let himself be distracted. He wouldn't take his eyes from the Doctor's back, his drooping shoulders.

'Was it worth it?' the little man asked instead. 'Two lives swapped for the creation of another. A whole town destroyed from the inside. For what? Fame? Fortune? Or just because it was there?'

Wakeling couldn't help himself.

'More than that, Doctor,' he spat, his feet still taking him closer. 'I didn't do this for me, or for science. I did it for the whole of humanity. Humanity despises tyranny; we simply cannot function under the rule of a despot. But our genes are the worst tyrant of them all; they control us completely, define us from the cradle to the grave, give us no respite, no free will. If we can conquer them, we can be truly free. Don't you see? I only wanted to set us free.'

The Doctor sighed, and began walking closer to the ruin.

'So free will is an illusion,' he sighed, still not looking back at Wakeling. 'Our destiny is written for us at birth. No matter how much we want to, we cannot change what the future holds for us. Or our loved ones.'

Wakeling barely even heard the words, so intent was he on the Doctor's back, on echoing every step he took through dry, dead dust. He had come so far, so far; how could he afford to fail now, when the

final sacrifice was asked of him? Once was an accident, twice was a decision taken completely out of his hands.

But this, this third time... History was testing him. How much do you believe, Professor? How much do you want to give your work to the universe? Just what will you let stand in your way?

Nothing? Then are you prepared for what you will see when you look in the mirror? Are you?

To give the universe freedom? I *am* prepared!

‘Not if we conquer the gene. We have mapped it, but we don’t truly understand it, don’t you see? But copying it, creating it in our own image... that brings us one step closer. Once we create, we can choose. We can truly choose what we want to be.’

‘And you chose what you are?’ the Doctor asked.

Wakeling paused then, and then only.

‘For the sake of humanity, I have sacrificed my own life. Do I like what I have become? No,’ he said slowly. ‘No. Can I live with that? I doubt it. But if my sacrifice is to mean anything, if I’m not going to throw my life away in vain, then the universe has to learn what I have. I’m already dead, Doctor. And I will do anything I must to make sure my work doesn’t die with me.’

The Doctor turned then, fixing Wakeling with such a stare.

It was half pity, half despair.

It was nothing, to be ignored.

‘You’re not the first,’ the Doctor said coldly.

Wakeling was dumbstruck. It was a lie. Had to be.

‘What?’ he managed, hoping that he had imbued it with the correct amount of disrespect, rather than disbelief.

The Doctor let the tip of his umbrella sink into the sand as he lent forward on it. It had seen better days, and could barely support his weight. But still he leant on it.

‘Humanity has got close to cloning itself on many occasions.

The present deadlock is only an echo of those reached before. It seems that in nearly every generation, there's a visionary who can see past the flaws and make a clone that lasts more than a few minutes. And in every generation, they have been silenced. I was there when the first human clone was born. I saw it with my own eyes, thousands of years ago in your eyes. As soon as they took their first breath, they became a thing, something to be used and discarded once it was done. Do you know, the first clones were mindless creatures used as stunt doubles in motion pictures? No one cared if they survived the stunts or not, as long as the shot was captured.'

The Doctor looked up then, fixing Wakeling with such cold, dark eyes.

'That's why they were silenced. Not because what they did went against nature's laws – it conforms to every law of nature there has ever been; life begets life – but once that life was created, once they held it in their hands, they forgot that it was life. They failed to treat it with the basic dignities that every lifeform deserves.'

Wakeling froze, his blood ice.

'They were silenced, their work forgotten, because they forgot one basic truth; it doesn't matter how life comes to be; it only matters that it is alive. History can't forget that. It won't forget what you did to the Heyworths. What kind of life you bestowed on your great creation.

'History always remembers where the bodies are buried,' the little imp said.

The Doctor paused then, let his eyes fall to the dust.

'There is no greater good,' he said softly. 'There are only casualties of war.'

And he stopped, finally silent.

Wakeling stood, panting hard as if he had been running fast, trying to escape the Doctor's words. He looked at him, cold eyes falling on that tiny, fragile frame. He looked so ridiculous, so comical; he was a clown, a performer escaped from some circus just waiting to twirl his battered umbrella and spin his hat along his arm until it came to rest – satisfied – back on his wiry hair again. And yet, and yet... His words drew blood.

He wanted to be calm, to argue his case as he had before.

Goddess knew he wanted to *convince* the Doctor, not kill him.

Wanted him to see that Wakeling had willingly sacrificed everything – dreams, goals, self-respect, *humanity*! – in the hope of advancing humanity just that one step. But the goddess had turned her cheek, unwilling to see, to counsel.

So Wakeling simply charged.

His hands outstretched, fingers dancing, as if he was simply some vengeful ghost slipped its chains for the night. The Doctor didn't move, didn't even try to block, even though that tattered umbrella could surely be a formidable weapon if he wanted it to be. His fingers locked around the Doctor's throat so easily, as if they had always meant to be there. Yes, part of him was disgusted, part of him wished the stranger would fight back (even kill him), but most of him...

Most of him was so relieved, so happy, to have his opponent's throat in his fingers, just to squeeze to defeat him. It seemed so easy.

Even as the Doctor choked, he managed to gasp:

'Yes. Perhaps. It's. Best.'

His voice was barely a whisper, a rasp as Wakeling's fingers pressed into his Adam's apple, through into the soft tissue of his throat. See, it wasn't so hard, to kill by yourself, with your own two bare hands. Perhaps *he* should have done it, all those years ago. 'No more decisions,' gasped the Doctor as Wakeling's fingers dug deep.

And then he went limp. It seemed so easy. He should have known it wouldn't be.

The ground deep beneath his feet gave a rumble, and everything changed.

At first, it was nothing more than a bass sound, just below his hearing. Then he felt the ground shake, rumbling beneath his knees. He knew what had happened immediately; something had disrupted the delicate balance between man and nature and set the mines quivering. Once they started, there was nothing to hold them up but the will of the goddess. She still looked elsewhere, and so they fell. One by one, every cavern and shaft carved out by man since he'd arrived and named Heritage began to collapse. From space, it must have been a breathtaking sight.

Still Wakeling tried to throttle the little stranger, but damn it if he didn't take it as a sign.

The Doctor kicked and bucked, and Wakeling flew through the air.

He hit the wall of the Heyworth farm just as it began to crumble.

It was such a delicate structure, once so firm and strong but now eaten out by fire and perhaps something else, perhaps simply the neglect of a whole township. Given that and the way the earth bucked and writhed, it was really inevitable. The walls began to crumble. Wakeling struggled to escape, but as he tried to run, the dying building collapsed into the earth, bringing away the ground he tried to run on.

The world gasped, spat out dust, as the ground fell away and tried to swallow Wakeling whole. Part of him wished it had, but then an equal part made him throw out his hands and claw at the earth for all he was worth. Beneath his fingernails, thin red dust began to gather.

The earth beneath his feet vanished, but still Wakeling clung on to the outskirts, and looked up. Into the Doctor's eyes.

'Help me,' he said. 'Please.'

For a moment – just a moment – the Doctor looked down, seeing the ground where a family home had once stood. He saw nothing but a murderer staring back up at him pleading for forgiveness. For just a moment – just a moment – he couldn't find it in himself to give it. There was a flash there, a single spark, where part of him wanted Wakeling to know what it felt like to clutch at sand, to feel it slip away under his fingers. To know that – whatever – death was inevitable.

It was as he stood there, in that instant, that he was interrupted.

A second passed.

Then Sweetness arrived.

There was a second – just a second, you understand – where they both could consider their actions. Ace thought about her mother. Bernard thought his own, private thoughts.

Then they clashed.

Ace charged, and grasped at the dolphin, trying desperately to remember everything the Doctor had told her the last time she'd met a Cetacean. Knowing him, it had probably been a test arranged for just this very occasion. That sneaky bastard; trust him to arrange a test where no matter how you tried to cheat, if you failed, someone would end up dead. It almost made her glad she had her contingency plan.

Cole, obviously, was next to useless, but then that was only to be expected.

Obviously, the dolphin would never accept defeat. That was a given. But he might accept that the opposing side had the strategic advantage. Once he had no choice, of course; Ace knew that sometimes you could win the battle before you even crushed your opponent's nose under the swing of your baseball bat. Trouble was, Bernard didn't seem to know that, and didn't seem to care that he didn't know. He just threw himself into the fight, teeth snapping and tail swishing; more than a match for both Ace and Cole. The way it was going, one of them would be dead before Ace's careful planning even came into effect.

He lurched towards her, his speed catching her off guard, his teeth all set to tear out her throat.

The only thing that saved her was the world suddenly shifting under her feet.

There was a hollow echo of something deep underground, and Ace could see the ground shimmy one way and then the other, sending the dolphin off his balance and twisting away to her side. He toppled over easily, his snout burying itself into the sand and his cradle giving out a tortured scream. Where his grey flesh touched the red dust, it stuck, drinking all the moisture from his skin. Ace pulled herself to her feet, and was just in time to see the thin earth finally give way and swallow Christa's body whole.

The young woman didn't even scream as she fell.

'Are you alright?' Cole asked, pulling himself to his feet beside her.

Ace tried not to think what the two bodies would look like, dashed against the rocks below.

'They could still be okay,' Cole said, although whether the idea relieved or scared him, Ace couldn't tell. 'If they landed on the horse's body.'

Ace would have said something, but Bernard was struggling to his feet.

Cole looked at Ace. She pulled her hand from her jacket pocket.

Bernard's eyes fixed on what lay in Ace's palm. A small length of rubber hose. Ace smiled sweetly and dangled it in the air like some dead thing she had just picked up. Bernard's walker gave a little grind. Still he didn't take his eyes from Ace and her prize.

'D'you know what this is?' Ace said, only half-thinking that the dolphin couldn't understand her. He was still looking, though. 'It connects your cradle's reservoir to the pumps that keep your body nice and moist. Or it did until I pulled it out.'

Even on a night like this, I reckon you'll soon dry out so much that you could die. Especially if you keep charging around everywhere.'

'If I'd known it was that easy to shut him up,' Cole said, 'I would have done it years ago.'

'There's enough water in his reservoir to keep him alive for a few more hours, if you're careful putting it on him,' Ace said firmly, turning her back on the beached dolphin. 'Keep him alive until I get back.'

Part of him wanted to argue, but somehow Cole thought better of it.

'Where are you going?' he asked instead.

Ace looked out across the desert, to where a tree with skin so blue it was almost black stood basking in the moonlight. She couldn't see anybody out there, but she knew that was where they'd be all the same.

'I'm going to save the Doctor,' she said firmly. 'He should need it by now.'

For just a moment, the Doctor didn't know where to look. At the gaping hole in the ground, the great scar that had swallowed an entire building. At Wakeling, desperately scrabbling at the dust, trying to pull himself free of an early grave. Or at the little red-haired girl who had walked up beside him, holding the heavy golden instrument that had killed her mother and – eventually –

her father too. For a moment, he wished he was somewhere else,

someone else.

Then he put a hand on the girl's shoulder, pulling her back.

'Stay back, Sweetness,' he said softly. 'It's dangerous.'

Then he lay face down on the ground, his umbrella held out before him as he crawled across the dust to reach Wakeling. It was slow going, making sure he spread his weight evenly, making sure he didn't break through the thin crust himself and send them both to an early grave. At least no one would have to dig the hole, this time. He looked up, and saw Wakeling's desperate face peeking above the ground, his eyes wide with terror, dusty tears streaking his face.

'Try not to panic,' he called soothingly. 'Grab hold of my umbrella.'

The Doctor offered it to him, handle first, but the scientist wouldn't take his hands from the earth, even as it turned to dust beneath his fingers.

'Help me!' he called, still struggling in the air.

'Grab hold!' the Doctor snapped firmly.

Wakeling looked at him, eyes wide, and took one hand from the ground to catch hold of the red plastic handle. The Doctor braced himself, digging his feet in tight and clutching the tattered body of his umbrella. This wasn't going to be easy.

'Both hands,' he said.

Wakeling stared at him, wide eyed and panicked.

No, not at him.

At the little red-haired girl who was walking calmly up to the edge of the pit, holding the tarnished instrument close to her chest, her preciousness. Big blue eyes fixed on the professor dangling there, one hand in the dust, one hand on the umbrella.

She didn't smile, didn't do much of anything but stand there and look down at him.

'Sweetness,' the Doctor warned, but he couldn't move. His weight added to hers might bring the whole edge crumbling away to nothing. 'Come away from the edge.'



But Sweetness didn't look, just kept staring at Wakeling beneath her feet.

'I'm so sorry,' the professor mouthed silently.

Sweetness still said nothing, just dropped the bloody instrument.

It twisted twice in the air, the moonlight catching where the dried blood hadn't dulled the surface, as it fell down, straight towards Wakeling's head. Perhaps it was just instinct that made him let go with both hands, just blind cold instinct that couldn't comprehend that letting go would mean plummeting to his death in the darkness below. Perhaps that was all it was. But then that wouldn't explain why, as he fell, he clutched the device tight into his chest like a baby, and smiled.

He disappeared in seconds, into the darkness.

Sweetness stood for a moment, and then began to cry.

When Ace rode up minutes later, that was how they found them; the little girl crying her eyes out in the dust, whilst the Doctor merely stood over her, watching. Ace gave him a stern but confused look as she hurried over, wrapping the little girl in her arms and whispering soothing words. It was what anyone would have done, except for the Doctor. He just stood looking at the two of them, enfolded in each other, perhaps thinking about what had been done that day. Perhaps only seeing two children clinging to each other in the darkness.

Whichever, there was a tear in his eye as he looked at them.

And elsewhere in the desert, Lee managed to pull himself from the dry earth, his face smeared with dust, mud and tears. He stood for a moment, under the patient gaze of the two moons above, and looked out across the desert. Nearly everywhere, there were the signs of the mines collapsing and crumbling into nothingness.

'Rest in peace,' he said softly.

Then he turned his back on them, and walked back to the town.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

10. August, 6048 CE

12:03

‘It don’t rain much on Heritage,’ Cole had said, ‘but when it comes, it comes.’

And he was right.

It had come in the night, while none of them had been expecting it, turning the dry dust to mud, making pools in the streets, turning the sides of the buildings slick and shining. It landed with such force that the drumming raindrops could be heard even in the foundations, the tiny Fussies cowering together in huddles, or going about rebuilding their homes, fearless. They all knew – fearless and frightened alike – that they wouldn’t be needed for a good few days. The rain might stop, but the mud would stay until at least the end of the week, maybe longer.

In the relative shelter of Cole’s bar and grill, Ace had watched the Doctor as he had sat, watching the sky for lightning.

She had prayed silently that he’d find some; at least that would have lit those dark little eyes of his. The townsfolk had taken to avoiding the Doctor, perhaps feeling awkward now that he had probed their darkest secrets and brought them into the day.

Probably they too were worried by the dark mood that had settled back onto him after Wakeling’s body had been unearthed.

Probably, they worried – as Ace had – what new campaign kept him so tightlipped quiet.

Still it rained. It rained so much, it threatened to flood the two fresh graves on the ’Flats, until Cole made the journey out to cover them. He pinned them over with tarpaulin, one strong sheet for the two graves, side by side, kept the rain out until the morning. He sat there all night, in the rain, just to make sure the cover didn’t blow away in the wind. Nobody sat with him; perhaps they thought it was a waste of their time, protecting two empty holes, nothing more than a symbol. He didn’t mind, was more relieved.

They’d needed a priest, somebody to say a few words of comfort, to bless their souls, the dead and the living both.

Somebody had asked the Doctor, but he had simply said:

‘There are reasons I don’t call myself Preacher,’ and would say nothing else on the subject.

And so it was that Cole found himself standing at the head of the graves, feeling the rain hammering against his back, dripping down his neck. He looked across the 'Flats in front of him and saw everybody left from Heritage, all dressed in black, all with the same look in their eyes. They were all there, the whole town, come to bear witness to the final consequences of that night. Maggie Parson, Mad Old Billy, even Doc Butler had managed to drag himself out of his home for the occasion. God alone knew how long it had been since he had last seen daylight first-hand – had he gone down with the others to watch the shuttle land, or had he cowered in his haven, like Cole had?

Cole saw the Doctor stood at the back of the crowd, his tattered umbrella open above his head, his eyes dark. It flapped in the wind, but offered what little protection it could against the elements. Everybody else let the rain pour over them, as if they hoped it would wash away the darkness in their souls. Either the Doctor's soul was spotless white, or he knew the futility of their thinking. Some things never wash away, no matter how much water flows under the bridge.

Ace stood near the Doctor, but not next to him. There was a look in her eye, the same she'd carried since Cole had told her the whole story. He knew she felt he'd betrayed her; she'd trusted him, and yet here he was, as guilty as the rest of them.

Sitting peacefully and quietly at her feet was a small Fussy. It looked strange to Cole, as if it had been knocked about in the trouble, or had been hastily thrown together for the occasion. It didn't look like one of the many Mel had constructed herself, from the packs brought with them when they'd landed.

The thought of Mel brought him back to the moment, the bloodshot eyes all looking to him to make it better. He wished he could say something soothing, lulling, bland enough to ease their minds: they were good people, and they would be missed.

But he knew deep inside that he wouldn't, couldn't let himself.

He steeled himself, and looked out at them.

'Maybe Mel and Ben weren't the most loved people,' he said, catching each and every eye as if to challenge them to deny it.

Each eye except the Doctor's. 'They tried their best, an' there ain't no one here can say they did more for this place than them.

Aye, they loved this dead earth more than anyone, gave it their sweat, their hours, their blood.'

He paused then, listening to the rain perhaps, perhaps seeing something other than those eyes, those faces then.

'We – all of us here, we did something terrible, something evil. Come the day, ain't one of us here can say their hands is clean of it. It ain't my place to say what'll happen up theres when our times come, ain't my place to say whether the goddess'll forgive us or not. Only she can say that. I don't even know if we can forgive ourselves for it. I hope so, but... but... Ain't one of us here'll ever forget, neither. Ain't one of us here who won't think about these two till the day they die. And if one of us does forget, then the rest of us'll remind them, send them out here to sit with them, to... I don't know what we'll do. I don't know.'

And Cole stopped there, knew he couldn't go on, knew it was all empty, all for nothing. They'd finish up here, go home and pack. Hell, he'd probably be leading the march to the first shuttle out of here. Sometimes, sometimes memories were just too much, you had to run from them, before they bared their sharpest tooth and ate you alive. They'd killed more than this couple, that night, and it'd take more rain than the heavens could provide to wash the stain free.

And then it happened.

The girl, little Sweetness – perhaps the one good thing to come out of all this mess – walked through the crowd, pretty as a picture even in her mourning clothes. She walked right between the graves and came to stand by Cole's side, putting her little hand in his battered metal one. Her flesh was warm and pink – his hand must have felt cold and dead to her, but still she held it tight. She looked up at him too, and smiled the sweetest smile.

There was something in that smile that warmed Cole.

Something that said perhaps, in time, they could all be forgiven. He looked out across the crowd then, and saw them all feeling exactly as he had. Each of them wondering what to do now, whether they had done enough. Whether they could ever do enough. That was when the Doctor strode forward, the Fussy still at his feet, and joined Cole by the head of the graves.

All eyes looked at him, as he stood there and silently held out his hand. The small Fussy crawled up his body and sat on his wrist. With

a slight cough, it deposited a heap of dust in his palm. It quickly grew damp from the rain.

‘Ashes to ashes,’ he said softly, ‘and dust to dust.’

And everyone saw the pattern of infinity etched on the wind as each grain tumbled its own way onto the coffins below.

‘The sky’s clearing,’ the Doctor said, motioning upwards with his free hand. Cole looked, through the tears. ‘The sun’s coming out.’

The Doctor fixed Cole with a curious stare, eyes cold and grey, soft as ice.

‘Somewhere, there’ll be rainbows,’ he said. ‘Soon.’

Ace came up and joined them by the graves, placing a cold hand on Cole’s other arm.

‘Take good care of her, won’t you,’ she said, looking down at Sweetness with sadness in her eyes.

And with that, the two of them turned and walked out of Heritage, disappearing as quickly as they’d arrived. Not one of the townsfolk watched them leave. They were each filing slowly by with handfuls of red dust, their eyes on the two empty graves.

For once, all their attention was focused on themselves, and what would happen next.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

10. August, 6048 CE

14:12

*‘ ...spend too much time in graveyards, these days. I’m sorry I let this happen.*

*I’m sorry I can’t talk to you about it, except like this. I’m sorry I couldn’t let you rest in peace.*

*I have to know. I have to see for myself – to know this has really happened, that it is meant to be, now, for certain. And if I find that it is, then I’ll have to live with that. I wanted to tell you.*

*This seemed to be the only way. ’*

Fragment of a letter found

buried in a desecrated grave

by Corporal Link Morrison,

following a UNIT investigation.

The walk back to the shuttle bay didn't take long at all, even though the Doctor insisted on dawdling and swinging his umbrella, deep in thought. The rain hadn't really stopped yet, but he'd probably just realised that the tattered thing was offering him no more protection than his coat and hat. If the universe wanted him to get wet, then wet he would get.

Ace kept pace beside him, for once silent with her own thoughts.

'Will they make it, Professor?' she asked eventually.

The Doctor considered for a moment, and then said:

'Perhaps.'

For a moment, it looked like he might leave it at that, but then continued.

'They've got a chance. A chance to move on from the past, and into the future. That's all any of us have, really, just a chance.'

He turned to look at her then, his cold, grey eyes penetrating her in that way that only they could, stripping away the layers and seeing right into her heart.

'We could go and see, if you'd like?'

But Ace had been expecting that, and had already made her mind up.

She shook her head.

'Nah,' she said, lightly. 'Sometimes you can know too much about the future, can't you?'

'Oh, I agree, I definitely agree, Ace,' he answered, darkly.

And the two of them walked to the shuttle bay in silence.

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### About the Author

Dale Smith is an award-winning playwright. I know, you wouldn't believe it, would you? But he's had plays on in London, Northampton, Manchester and Edinburgh. And he's shaken Melvyn Bragg's hand. But don't get too excited: he used to have a pony-tail.

Oh, and people seemed to like his two Brief Encounters for *DWM*.

He spends a lot of time sleeping. It keeps him happy.

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